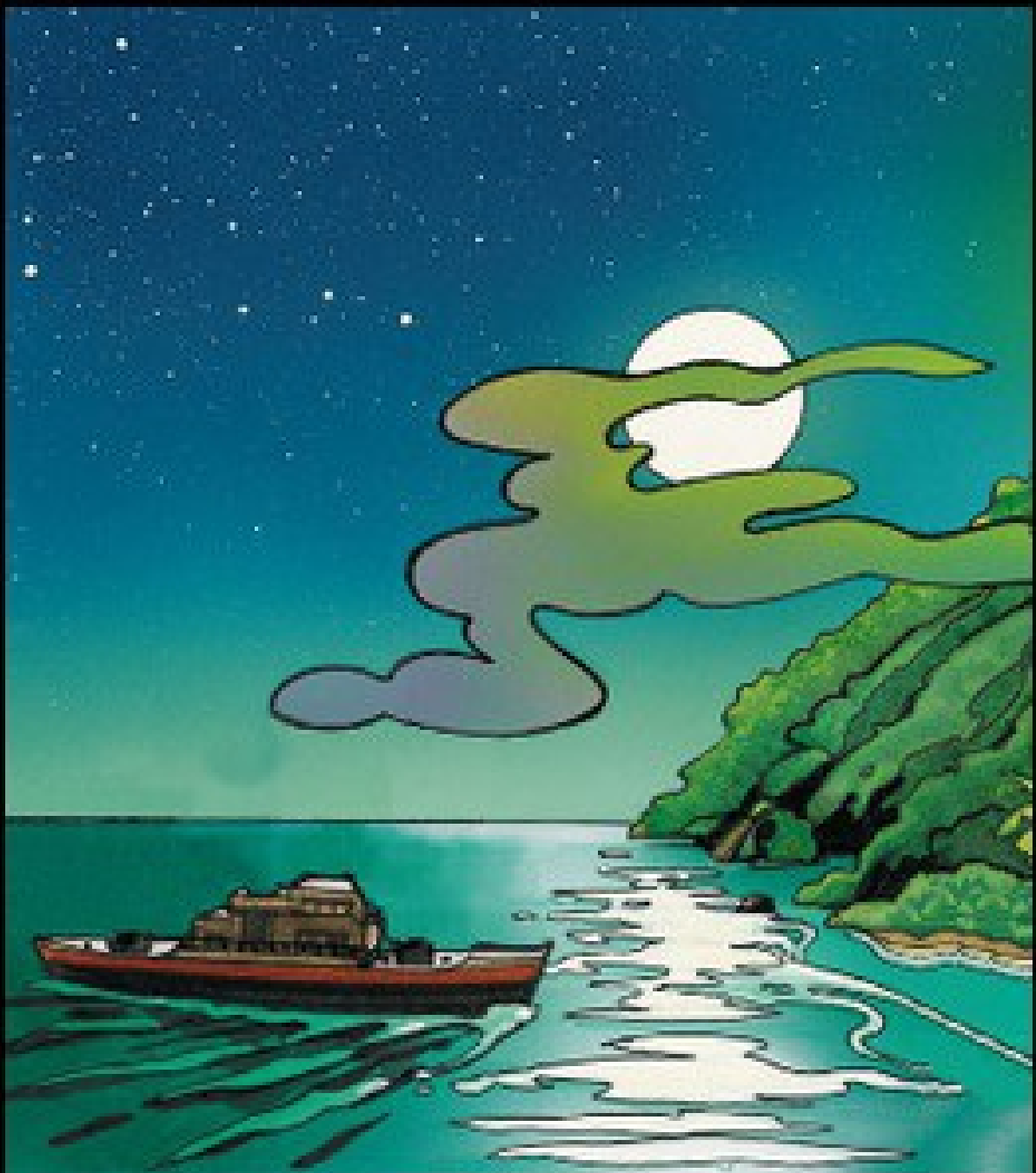


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND OF DEATH

PART I: THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
ISLAND OF DEATH
Part I: The Riddle of the Sphinx**

An unknown client engages The Three Investigators in a case involving the activities of a mysterious organization. The trail takes Jupiter, Pete and Bob to the owner of a large company who is arranging for one of his ships to sail to the Island of Death in the Pacific Ocean. But nothing is known of the purpose of the trip or its cargo. As the ship is about to leave, one of the investigators sneaks aboard to check...

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Island of Death
Part I: The Riddle of the Sphinx

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(Part I: The Riddle of the Sphinx)*

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1. The Hidden Message

Jupiter Jones sat in an armchair inside an old mobile home trailer which is the headquarters of The Three Investigators.

“Okay, so the vacation is coming!” he said. “What are we going to do?”

Bob and Pete looked at each other at a loss.

“If we don’t have a case, then what else can we do?” asked Pete.

“Perhaps we could go somewhere,” Bob said. “Perhaps we could drive to the Rocky Mountains for two weeks to hike, climb, or just to laze around.”

“Great idea, except that it is not good for me,” Pete said.

“Why?” Bob asked. “I thought you love to go hiking.”

“Yes. Did I tell you my parents are going away on vacation?” Pete said. “In three days, I’ll have my place free and clear. But this also means that they will not allow me to be away from the house for long.”

“Lucky you.” Bob pulled a face. “I’m sure my dad will think that throughout the summer vacation, I have more time to mow the lawn or take out the garbage or wash the car. Wash the car! What nonsense! Do cars drive better when they’re clean?”

“Then we’d better come up with something, else the only thing left to do is to clean up Headquarters!” Juve remarked.

“More cleaning?” Bob exclaimed. “This issue always crops up every school vacation!”

“We have deferred it for so long,” Jupiter said. “So why not we clear up this mess once and for all?”

“And that’s the reason you called us here?” Bob asked incredulously.

“No, not really,” Jupiter said. “Actually, I wanted to discuss what else we could do. Now we know that Pete cannot leave his house for long, so if we can’t come up with something, then the only thing left is to clean up Headquarters whether we like it or not.”

“If you’ve already decided, why did we have to come all the way down here?” Bob mouthed.

“You can still suggest other ideas before the vacation starts,” Jupiter insisted. “How about you think about this as your homework.”

“Homework!” cried Pete. “Damn, I’ve still got my maths homework!” He looked at the clock. “Gotta go, fellas, or I’ll never get it right again. *Ciao!*”

He ripped open the door of the trailer and rushed out.

“I’m going to join Pete,” mumbled Bob. “See you tomorrow, Jupe!”

A short time later, the First Investigator was sitting alone at Headquarters. Sighing, he lifted himself up from his chair, turned off the light and left the trailer which stood on the grounds of The Jones Salvage Yard. He strolled over to an adjacent house where he had lived with his uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda since the death of his parents.

When he opened the front door, a blood-curdling scream rang through the house! Jupiter flinched and listened. Then he realized that the scream was from the TV.

Slowly he stepped over the doorway and closed the door quietly. He listened from the corridor. There was silence. Everything remained calm.

As he walked into the living room, Jupiter saw the horror-stricken face of a young, blonde woman on the TV. “Aunt Mathilda!” he exclaimed.

It was Aunt Mathilda’s turn to flinch. She was sitting in front of the TV with a bowl of popcorn in her arms. Uncle Titus was hanging motionless in his armchair, snoring softly with his mouth open, and his huge black moustache vibrated slightly.

“So that was the scream,” Jupiter quipped. “I thought someone was being murdered here!”

“Murdered?” Aunt Mathilda shook her head without taking her eyes off the TV. On the screen, an actor in a cheap, slimy monster costume was wavering towards the blonde, groaning and with arms outstretched. And now the music, typical for scary movies, started.

As Aunt Mathilda fumbled for the popcorn, she said soundlessly: “You simply have too vivid an imagination, Jupe. That comes from your frequent detective play. I’ve always known that that would have its long-term effects...” She fell silent mid-sentence.

The screaming victim had fled and ran through a dark forest. Why didn’t she run away right away instead of standing there screaming? Aunt Mathilda didn’t care. She was so tied up that she was no longer aware of her nephew’s presence.

Now it was Jupiter's turn to shake his head. Mathilda Jones and her scary movies! As long as he could remember, his aunt had never missed any of the old horror classics on TV. This had the advantage that as a little boy, he could often sit next to the sofa and read his books. After five minutes or so, Aunt Mathilda would have simply forgotten about him and with it, the admonitions to go to bed. And Jupiter smiled. Some things never change.

The sight of Aunt Mathilda's bowl of popcorn made Jupiter hungry. He went straight to the kitchen. There, he found leftovers from lunch, put them in the microwave and then hungered to eat them. As so often, he pondered over how much he should be eating. When he pushed the plate aside, he looked worriedly at his unmistakable stomach. Once again, hunger had won the eternal battle against diet. In the next few days, it would be better for him to avoid standing on the scales.

A while later, Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus came in. "Well rested?" Jupiter asked his uncle with a grin.

"There's no better sleeping pill than one of your aunt's favourite movies," Titus remarked.

"Has the blonde beauty been saved?" Jupe turned to his aunt.

"Yes. The hero hunted down the beast." She put the bowl of popcorn on the table and Jupiter automatically grabbed some and popped it into his mouth.

"Have we told you the news of the day?" Uncle Titus asked.

"Oh, yes!" Aunt Mathilda blurted out. "Hans and Konrad wrote!" She fished a postcard off the kitchen table and handed it to Jupiter. On it was a fairy-tale medieval castle, with its snow-white limestone façade and fanciful turrets peeking out from the forested mountain tops. Unmistakably Germany. Hans and Konrad Schmid are the two Bavarian brothers who used to work for Uncle Titus at the salvage yard until they went back home.

"We're going to Germany!" Aunt Mathilda took a little aerial leap.

"Really? Is it finally working out? It took you months to plan this trip!"

"Now the time has finally come. We're flying to Munich next week. They'll pick us up at the airport and then we'll go to their home in a village outside the city. Oh, two weeks in Europe! Isn't that romantic, Titus? I'm so happy!"

Titus Jones nodded smiling. Aunt Mathilda was responsible for emotional outbursts. He was mostly reserved.

“And what does that mean to me?” Jupiter asked “I hope you don’t expect me to spend half my summer vacation running a salvage yard by myself.”

“Why alone?” Uncle Titus asked, unmoved. “You have Bob and Pete! All three of you can do it.”

Jupiter stopped his mouth open in horror. The Three Investigators were to run the business for two weeks? And that during the vacation?

“Don’t keep teasing that poor boy, Titus,” said Aunt Mathilda, giving her husband a gentle nudge between the ribs. “Don’t worry, Jupe, of course we’re closing the salvage yard during the time we are away. After all, we’ve earned the vacation. I would just be grateful if you didn’t get the idea of going camping with Bob and Pete or something during this time. After all, someone has to watch the house.”

Jupiter breathed again. “No problem.”

“And don’t get any ideas!” Aunt Mathilda quipped. “Just because the cats are out of the house doesn’t mean the mice can dance on the table!”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “Is it starting now?”

“What’s starting?” Aunt Mathilda asked.

“The week-long sermon on the duties and commandments of a nephew left home alone?”

“Don’t get cheeky!” Aunt Mathilda said. “I just don’t want to worry when I’m on vacation. So, hands off playing detective! Nothing good has ever come out of it.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” contradicted Jupiter. “Thanks to our work, many a crime has been solved. The police of Rocky Beach would be—”

“—Would be very happy if you didn’t constantly interfere with their work. Please, Jupe, do me a favour—no dangerous investigations while we’re away!”

“At the moment we don’t have a case anyway,” Jupiter tried to calm his aunt. “And if our phone at Headquarters should ring, it’s probably just about a runaway cat.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” said Aunt Mathilda. Then she and Uncle Titus said good night and went to bed.

Jupiter made his way upstairs. While he brushed his teeth, he imagined himself home alone for the two weeks. Of course, he would not disappoint his uncle and aunt. But two weeks without them in the house and in the

salvage yard? That was too tempting not to plan at least one little party! First thing tomorrow, he would tell Pete and Bob about it and make plans with them.

Jupiter had come into his bedroom when he noticed a small red light on his desk flashing. The meant that there was a message on their answering machine at Headquarters! A few weeks ago, Jupiter had laid an electrical cable from Headquarters to his bedroom. With some fiddling, he extended the message light on the answering machine to his desk. So when someone left a message, the red light in his bedroom would flash.

He took one look at the alarm clock. A little after eleven. Who would have left a message at that time? As he cannot access the answering machine from his bedroom, Jupiter decided to wait until tomorrow. It should not be anything urgent. Or... what if it wasn't Bob or Pete... Jupiter growled and angrily flipped the covers back. Damn his curiosity!

What was he thinking with this extension of the message light? He put on a shirt, slipped on his sneakers and sneaked out of his bedroom, down the stairs to the front door.

The mountains of rubble looked ghostly in the moonlight. The gravel crunched under his shoes as he crossed the salvage yard. It was chilly. Jupiter crossed his arms and took a step. This short march through the night only woke him up again unnecessarily.

He already regretted having given in to his curiosity. It better be important! He dug the key out of his pocket, took the padlock off and opened the door to the trailer.

Jupiter went to the answering machine, rewound the tape and played the message. "Sorry you're not there, Jupe. Or you're probably already in bed."

That was Pete. "I'm still working on my maths homework. Thought you could give me a quick hand. But anyway, I probably wouldn't have got it anyway. See you tomorrow!"

"Great," hummed Jupiter. "Thanks, Pete." He thought for a moment whether to call back, but he'd probably wake Pete's parents.

He was already on his way out when the phone rang again. Pete again? Jupiter picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

Someone cleared his throat at the other end.

"Hello? Who is that?" Jupiter asked.

"Jupiter Jones?" The voice was a little more than a low, scratchy rattle.

“Yes.”

“Of The Three Investigators?”

“I just said that.”

“I have a case for you.”

“Who is that?”

“It’s not important.”

“Would you please tell me who you are?” Jupiter insisted.

“I said it’s not important. Lives are at stake... unless you solve a riddle.”

“What riddle? Listen, if this is a joke, then—”

“No kidding!” the man interrupted him abruptly. He coughed and quietly repeated: “No kidding. Someone will lose his life... if you don’t solve the riddle of the Sphinx.”

“The riddle of the Sphinx? ... Hello? Are you there?”

“I’ll call again.”

Before Jupiter could reply, the man had hung up.

“Two more days of school,” Pete moaned as he got off his bike and parked it in the dusty salvage yard. “I’ll breathe a sigh of relief when this school year is over. It’s really no fun to scrape by just sitting there year after year. Be glad you don’t have a problem with that, Bob... Hey, Bob, are you listening to me?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure.”

“That was a lie. You’re probably on vacation mood already, right?” Pete asked.

“No, with Jelena.” Bob noticed a moment too late what he had said and blushed.

“So, with Jelena!” said Pete, stretched and grinned broadly. It had not escaped his notice that Bob had been getting along very well with the girl in the wheelchair recently. “Do you have a date again?”

Bob nodded. “In half an hour. So I hope that Jupe will make it short. I wonder why he wants to see us so urgently.”

Bob and Pete entered Headquarters, the door of which was wide open because of the heat. Jupiter was already waiting for them. He asked: “What has only one voice, and initially walks on four legs, then on two legs, and finally on three?”

“This is a typical Jupiter Jones greeting,” Pete noted. “How about next time you say: ‘How are you getting on, dear friends’?”

Jupiter ignored him. "Come on, time is short, solve the riddle or someone will die!"

"Is that why we're here? To solve a riddle?" Bob asked. "Or someone will die? If I had known..."

"A little more inquisitive spirit, if you please!" Jupiter said.

"Something that has only one voice, and initially walks on four legs, then on two legs, and finally on three?" Pete pondered for a moment. "There is no such thing."

"If I were the Sphinx and you were an unsuspecting wanderer on your way to Thebes, I would have to strangle you now." Jupiter remarked.

"Excuse me?" Pete asked.

"The Sphinx. A mythical creature from Greek mythology—a female head on a winged lion's body. She was sitting on a rock and anyone who wanted to get past her had to solve the riddle I just asked you. If the answer was wrong, she'll strangle him."

"And why are you telling us this?" Bob wanted to know.

"Because last night, I got a phone call from a very mysterious person." Jupiter told them. "He asked me to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. What do you think of that?"

"Strange," Pete murmured. "I wonder if someone is playing a joke on you."

"I suspected as much. The caller claimed he was serious," Jupiter said.

"Someone will lose his life if we don't solve this riddle? Is that a threat?" Bob asked.

Jupiter shook his head. "It didn't sound like that. I don't think he meant the 'someone' to be any one of us. I think he needs our help."

"So it's a new case," Bob said. Jupiter nodded.

"Why do people always come to us with such absurd stuff?" Pete asked. "Can't we get a normal job? Shadowing someone because his wife suspects him of cheating, for example... or find accident witnesses. Just normal stuff."

"Do you think that would be more exciting?" Jupiter asked.

"No. But less strenuous," Pete replied. "The riddle of the Sphinx—if that's what it is, it makes my head spin."

"Don't exaggerate, Pete," Jupiter quipped. "It's not that difficult a riddle."

"No? Well, I'm at a loss. Have you figured it out yet?"

Jupiter nodded smugly. "Of course."

“Then why are you asking us?” Bob asked.

“To keep you mentally busy.”

“I don’t have time. Just tell us what you know, Juve,” Bob demanded.

“The answer is a human,” Jupiter said with a sigh. “A human, who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and then uses a walking stick in old age.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other in surprise.

“How did you come up with that?” Pete wanted to know.

“I read about it before.”

“Read?”

“You don’t have to know everything, Pete. You just have to know where to look it up. In this case, it was from a book on Greek mythology. In the saga, Oedipus meets the Sphinx one day and solved the riddle. The Sphinx was astounded and fell head-first from the rock to her death.”

“All right,” Bob said. “Now, if the answer to the riddle is already documented somewhere, in this case, in mythology, what’s the point of the caller asking you to solve it?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter admitted.

“Perhaps it has nothing to do with the answer itself...” Bob suggested. “Perhaps there is a hidden message in this riddle.”

“What do you mean by a hidden message?” Pete asked.

“A hidden message, such as a clue to something else,” Bob said. “I don’t know. Anyway, what do we do with that answer?”

“The mysterious man had said that he would call again,” Juve said.

“I hope he does soon,” Bob said. “Because I have a date in a few minutes.”

Pete threw his head back, fluttered his eyelids and muttered: “With Jelena!”

Even before Bob could respond, the phone rang. The conversation died down for an instant. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker, let it ring one more time and picked up the receiver. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“The riddle of the Sphinx,” the same rasping voice that came out of the phone the night before. “Have you solved it?”

“Yes, sir, we did.”

“So?”

“We’ll give you the answer when you tell us who you are and what you want from us.”

“After,” the stranger promised.

Jupiter hesitated for a moment. “All right. The answer is a man.”

There was a click on the line and the conversation was ended. The First Investigator looked irritated and finally hung up.

“A resounding success,” Bob thought. “If you ask me, it’s a complete joke.”

Pete nodded. “Someone’s pulling our leg. Probably some stupid guy at school who’s jealous of us.”

“Or who wants to make fun of us,” joked Bob.

Then something clicked. Then a whirring sound came from the corner next to the desk.

“We’re getting a fax,” Jupiter noticed and curiously bent over the fax machine. The First Investigator had salvaged the machine—like most of their equipment—from the junk that Uncle Titus regularly bought and repaired for re-sale. In this way, Headquarters had gradually turned into a professional office.

The fax machine clattered softly and quietly pushed a piece of paper out. A beep signalled the end of the transmission. Jupiter tore off the paper. “A copied page from a book,” he remarked.

“Who sent it?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know. The sender has deleted the header. It doesn’t say the name or the phone number.” The First Investigator scanned the text. Then he lowered the paper slowly and looked at his friends with a frown.

“What’s the matter?” Bob asked. “What does it say?”

“I think the riddle of the sphinx was only a test,” replied Jupiter. “This is the real mystery.”

“Is that the hidden message?” Pete said.

“It is an excerpt from *The Encyclopedia of Secret Societies*.”

“How do you know that?” Pete asked.

“It says it here. I will read it to you,” Jupiter cleared his throat and read:

Sphinx

A secret organization of archaeologists and treasure hunters. Named after the figure from Greek mythology, a symbol for everything mysterious, as well as the Egyptian Sphinx, which was a symbol for the Pharaoh.

Sphinx is a group of trained researchers who evade the slow-moving mills of bureaucracy by starting archaeological expeditions on their own, instead of waiting for government funding. However, since they also forego government permits in the process, they are criminals who are more interested in hidden riches than in acquiring knowledge. Their first activities have been known since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Rumour has it that members of Sphinx have infiltrated many of the great archaeological expeditions of the last century to gain valuable information about future excavation sites. In recent decades, however, things have become very quiet around the organization. It is questionable whether it even still exists.

Critics even claim that Sphinx is a modern myth and in reality the group never existed. Yet there are art treasures in the world from which nobody knows where they came from. Buyers tell of mysterious middlemen through whom they purchased the items. Whether these black marketeers actually belong to an organized group or are working on their own, however, remains questionable.

Jupiter let his hand sink and leaned back.

“Wow,” Bob said.

“Sounds interesting, doesn’t it?” An adventurous twinkle had crept into Jupiter’s eyes.

“And who faxed us this?” Pete asked.

“Our client on the phone.”

“And why?”

“To solve the mystery.”

“What mystery?”

“The riddle of the Sphinx. Not the Greek or Egyptian Sphinx, but the riddle of this secret organization known as Sphinx. There must be one! We should look into this case.”

“Without knowing who our client is,” Pete wondered.

“He’ll get back to us,” Jupiter was convinced. “But if we won’t give him the results, unless we know who he is.”

“What kind of results?” Bob asked. “What does he want from us?”

“That we find out as much as we can about Sphinx. And he’s not the only one interested.”

“Let me guess—you are on it as well,” Pete surmised. “That’s not surprising.”

“Don’t you? That sounds like an exciting case!” Jupiter exclaimed. “I suggest that Bob makes his way to the *Los Angeles Times* archives right away. Pete, you go to the library and try to find out about this secret society.”

“And you?” Pete asked, annoyed. “You just sit at home, lazing around, waiting for news?”

Jupiter sat up in feigned indignation and cleared his throat. “Of course not. I’ll try to get answers over the Internet.”

“Which amounts to the same thing,” Pete remarked.

Bob slipped on his chair. “Sorry, fellas, but I don’t have time now, as you know. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Your lack of detective zeal is deplorable,” moaned Jupiter. “But fine. Tomorrow, then. We’ll meet here after school. And then I want to hear some interesting results!”

Results! Jupiter had demanded results from his friends. And now he stood there without the slightest clue.

2. The Vanishing Treasure

After Bob and Pete had left, Jupiter had spent the whole evening in front of the computer, surfing the Internet and looking for Sphinx in half the virtual world. He had consulted every search engine he knew and each time only found information about Greek or Egyptian mythology and about the stone monument in Giza.

It took him hours before he came across the mysterious secret society for the first time, but the information was as vague as in the fax. Jupiter had tried archaeology, secret societies, and famous sites all over the world—each time without any significant result. More than once, he had lost sight of his goal on his journey through the world of almost unlimited information and had succumbed to the temptation to simply let himself drift through the websites. The more hours of unsuccessful searches passed, the more often he found himself reading articles that had nothing to do with his original request. Again and again he had to force himself to return to his original goal.

Sphinx—this name seemed to be a curse. But what had he expected? That a secretly operating organization of grave robbers—if it really existed—would have its own homepage that informed anyone interested about their illegal activities? It had been absurd to assume that he would find what he was looking for on the Internet. In the end, he was just as clever as before—he knew that Sphinx might have existed or still might not have existed. Maybe it was all just a myth.

Apparently, serious authorities had not yet dealt with Sphinx. The information Jupiter came across was more than doubtful. They were often connected with treatises about dangerous secret societies with plans for world domination.

Whatever their unknown client wanted to know—Jupiter would not be able to give him an answer. And the more he thought about the matter, the more it worried him that he knew nothing about the night caller. Pete had been right. Why should they work for someone whom they don't know? He still hoped that Bob and Pete had found out more in their search.

The next afternoon, Jupiter waited anxiously for his colleagues. But when Pete entered Headquarters, Jupiter could already tell by the look on his face that he wouldn't like the news from the Second Investigator.

"So?" he asked expectantly.

"Nothing," Pete replied grumpy. "I am now an expert in Greek and Egyptian mythology, but otherwise nothing has come out of my digging in the library. I found some books about secret societies. But they only contain what we already know. As it is, I can't get any more information about Sphinx. Perhaps this society doesn't even exist now."

The First Investigator nodded in a low voice. "I have that feeling too."

Then Bob walked into Headquarters. His smile disappeared into thin air when he saw the faces of his friends. "You don't seem particularly happy."

"We're not," grumbled Pete. "We have nothing. Please tell us you found out more than we did. At least something is better than nothing."

"I found a 12-year-old article in the *Los Angeles Times* archives that might help us."

Immediately, Jupiter sat up straight as a candle in his chair. "Finally, a lead! Let's hear it!"

"It wasn't easy," Bob said, while he was digging around in his backpack. "I searched for ages and combed through a thousand microfilms and bound volumes—without result. I was about to give up when Mrs Grayson from the archives had an idea. She always knows where to find things. Her memory is phenomenal. Once she's read an extraordinary article, she never forgets it." He unearthed a small stack of copies and put it on the table.

Bob began: "Mrs Grayson recalled a case that went through the press twelve years ago. A group of archaeologists were busy digging up an ancient temple site somewhere in Laos. The entire area had been sealed off and the excavations had been going on for months. Everything was in order, until one day, a member of the team was caught by customs on her way back to America."

"What for?" Pete asked.

"For smuggling. She was carrying about half a dozen valuable statues of deities that she wanted to get out of the country."

"To sell them off?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes. At first, it looked like she was trying to rip off her colleagues by stealing the statues. But the case prompted the authorities to investigate

everyone else on the team to make sure that no valuable art treasures was being smuggled out.”

“So?” Pete asked.

“During the inspection, something incredible was revealed. The entire excavation had not even been officially approved. It is usually a very tedious process when a team of archaeologists wants to dig around somewhere, particularly so in a foreign country. You have to apply for funds to finance the excavation, and you need permissions from many authorities. It can easily take a year before you are even allowed to use the spade for the first time. Such projects are often dropped during the preparation phase because the bureaucratic process is simply too long and expensive.”

“And this dig in Laos was not approved?” Jupiter asked.

“Right.”

“But how did they get away with it?”

“By falsifying all the papers, bribing officials, and cheating... By simply pretending that everything was above board... And nobody found out for months.”

“Bold,” Pete thought. “When they found out, I’m sure everyone was arrested.”

Bob shook his head. “No. When the truth came out, the dig was abandoned. The entire team had fled—of course without making the unearthed treasures vanish. Neither the treasures nor the thieves were ever found.”

“Vanishing treasure... That’s interesting!” Jupiter said, pinching his lower lip. “And it sounds a lot like what we know about Sphinx. But it could also be a coincidence.”

“Couldn’t be,” Bob objected. “Because it gets better.”

“What else is there?” Juve asked.

“Dr Maria Svenson,” Bob continued. “That was the woman who was caught trying to smuggle the statues out. She claimed in an interrogation that she belonged to a group called Sphinx and it was not the first time that this organization had conducted unauthorized excavations. Later, however, she took it all back and claimed the opposite—that she had only been hired as an assistant for the job and had not known anything about all this. She presented herself as a victim who had been used for the smuggling operation.”

“Did anyone believe her?” Juve wondered.

“No. The evidence was clearly against her. And so she went to jail for two years.”

The First Investigator nodded thoughtfully. “Then Sphinx really does exist.”

“So what do we do now?” Pete wanted to know.

“Since Dr Svenson is our only real lead so far, we should track her down,” Jupiter suggested, and turned to Bob. “Have you been able to find out anything else about her?”

“Before her arrest, she was a visiting lecturer here in California, teaching at various universities. But after her release? I don’t know.” A grin was thrown across his face. “But I may know soon.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Pete asked.

“I’ve put someone out to find out about Maria Svenson.”

“And who would that be, may I ask?” Jupiter asked.

“Jelena.”

“What?” Jupiter cleared his throat and swallowed the remark on his tongue. He paused. Not that he had anything against Jelena. She was just extremely cheeky, snappish and persistent. And sometimes she would just get on his nerves, plain and simple. “What has Jelena got to do with this?”

“I told her about our investigation,” Bob calmly replied.

“And why?”

“Because she asked. And because she can help us.”

“Of course,” Jupiter growled and crossed his arms. “Jelena, the super woman. If it were up to her, she would probably always help us. But we are The Three Investigators, not four, remember?”

“Don’t get upset, Juve. I had a good reason to tell her.”

“Which is?”

“She’s still in very good contact with Dr Arroway.”

Dr Lou Ann Arroway was an archaeologist and cultural historian who taught at the University of Los Angeles. The Three Investigators and Jelena had been involved with her in a previous case, but after the successful completion of the investigation, contact was quickly broken off. But not so for Jelena.

“I don’t know what it’s like with archaeologists, but I could imagine it’s the same as most other professions—everyone knows everyone. I wouldn’t be surprised if Dr Arroway knows who Maria Svenson is and can perhaps even tell us where she is. I just drove by Jelena’s house and asked her to ask Dr Arroway.”

“We could have done that ourselves,” Jupiter replied, still grumpy.

At that moment, the telephone rang.

“Well, if you really want the information quick, I see no harm in asking her,” Bob said triumphantly.

Jupiter sighed, pressed the loudspeaker button and picked up the phone.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hi. This is Jelena. Hard at work?”

“You could say that.”

“Bob told me about your new case. So, once again, you’re at a loss.”

“There can be no question of that at all,” Jupiter replied irritably and immediately bit his tongue. It was not easy to provoke Jupiter but Jelena managed this feat whenever she wanted.

“I will still help you to get started,” Jelena continued patronizingly. “I spoke with Dr Arroway on the phone. She actually knows Maria Svenson—from her student days. She knew about the Laos story, but she didn’t take it too seriously. Everyone makes a mistake, she said.”

“Does she know where Dr Svenson lives now?”

“Yes. In Pasadena. She no longer teaches, but works in an archaeological research lab. Wait, I wrote down her address.” Jelena gave the address.

“Okay, Jelena.”

“Okay? Is that all? How about a loud ‘thank you’?”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said, tormented.

“Is your loudspeaker on?” Jelena asked.

“Yes.”

“Bob, keep me informed,” Jelena cried, louder than necessary. “*Ciao!*”

After Jupiter hung up, he looked at his watch. “We can still make it to Pasadena without getting there at an impolite time. Come on, fellas, let’s go.”

“You want to go straight there?” Pete asked, astonished.

“Why not? What are we waiting for? It’s the only lead we have!”

Then the phone rang again. Jupiter picked up. “You forgot something, Jelena?”

“What do you know about Sphinx?” wheezed the dark voice.

The First Investigator winced. “We have a lead.”

“Good. What do you know?” the voice asked.

Jupiter tried to make his voice sound hard and determined. “We haven’t pursued it yet. And we won’t until you tell us who you are.”

Silence. Then the voice said: “I give you three more days to solve the mystery, else someone will die.”

“You can’t threaten us!”

“It’ll be one of you!”

“We will not—” Click!

Jupiter looked at the phone for a moment, then he slowly put it down. His friends stared at him. Pete swallowed.

“Well, I don’t know about you guys, but this is getting a little too weird,” Pete said.

“These are nothing but empty threats,” claimed Jupiter.

“How do you know that? Maybe the guy’s a psychopath! I think we should...” Pete faltered.

“This is the point at which you usually ask us to keep our hands off things,” Bob noted.

“Right,” Pete said.

“But it won’t work this time. If we don’t pursue this case, the psychopath may take it seriously.” Bob shook himself, gripped by a sudden shiver.

“Then we have no choice,” said Pete in a grave voice.

“Exactly,” Jupiter said firmly. “Therefore any further discussion is superfluous. So let’s pay Maria Svenson a visit.”

He got up from his chair and looked at the two of them with an inviting look.

“I can’t,” Pete said quickly. “My parents are going on vacation tomorrow and I promised my mother I’d help her pack. She’ll probably explain to me for hours how often I have to water which flowers and stuff, you know.” He looked at his watch. “I’d have another hour, but that’s hardly enough time to get to Pasadena and back. Besides—”

“It’s all right, Pete,” Jupiter said appeasingly. “Bob and I will go!”

The road to Pasadena led them into the mountainous hinterland. Bob’s rickety Beetle groaned on every climb. Jupiter watched the oil temperature gauge with concern. Here in the mountains, it was hotter than on the coast, and it was still quite a distance to the Los Angeles National Forest, on the edge of which Pasadena lay. This area was rocky and arid, but the view

was breathtaking. In front of them was a huge green forest area spread out and in the south, the unmoving haze of Los Angeles stuck in the air.

When Jupiter looked in his rear-view mirror, he saw the wooded canyons that rutted the landscape in bizarre scars and ran out into the Pacific Ocean glittering on the horizon. Then Pasadena appeared. The picturesque city lay in a green valley. The white roofs of the houses glowed invitingly in the sun.

“It’s quite nice here,” Bob said, “but I would miss the sea. To live in a city where you can’t see the sea—that wouldn’t be for me.”

Jupiter listened with only half an ear, because he was lost in the road map and was looking for Dr Svenson’s address. “Turn left at the next intersection.”

Ten minutes later, they reached the house. It was in a typical suburban neighbourhood where all houses looked alike and everyone knew everyone. A few children were playing in the street when they got out of the car.

“Have you thought about what we’re gonna do?” Bob asked as they were headed for the front door.

“What are you thinking?” Jupe asked.

“How do we get our answers? She’s certainly not going to come clean if we ask her about Sphinx.”

The First Investigator waved him off. “We’ll have to decide spontaneously. Let me do the talking.”

Three steps led up to the porch. On the doorbell was a single name: ‘Svenson’. He rang the door bell. Nothing moved—not even after the second and third attempts.

“Nobody here,” Bob said. “Maybe we should have called after all.”

But at that moment, a car stopped at the road. A sportily-dressed woman in her late forties got out with a huge briefcase under her arm. Her short hair was silvery grey. She threw the door shut with verve and approached the two detectives with resolute steps.

“Are you looking for me?” the woman asked.

“If you are Maria Svenson...” Jupiter said.

“I am. But I’ll tell you right now that I have all the magazines that I want, I’m already a paying member of the animal rights group and I have no interest in political organizations.” She put the monstrous bag under her arm and went for her key. “Or religious ones, for that matter.”

“That’s not what we are here for. May I introduce ourselves?” Jupiter said. “My name is Jupiter Jones and this is my colleague, Bob Andrews.”

“Colleague? Of what?” Dr Svenson asked.

“We are—” Bob began.

“—Searching for information,” Jupiter interrupted. At this point in time, there was no need to tell Dr Svenson that they were detectives. “It’s about the... incident in Laos in which you were involved twelve years ago.”

Dr Svenson paused in mid-motion. The bag under her arm began to slip very slowly. “Excuse me?”

“You were arrested for smuggling at that time.” Jupiter continued. “We’d like to talk to you about that.”

“Goodness, it’s been ages!” she cried in surprise. Then she got angry. “But I don’t see how that’s any of your business.” She got hold of the key and started to open the door. “I don’t know where you’ve dug up this old story, but I don’t want to talk to you about it.”

“I assure you, we mean no harm,” Jupiter said quickly. “We just want to talk to you about the incident at that time.”

“It’s better that you leave now,” Dr Svenson snapped.

“Or should we rather talk about Sphinx?” Jupiter tried another approach.

The door swung open, but at that moment the briefcase slipped out of Dr Svenson’s clasp, slammed into the stairs and jumped up. A flood of books and papers poured down the stairs and down the path. “Damn!”

Bob and Jupiter jumped down the porch and helped with the collection. Apart from books, notebooks and loose sheets of paper, there was also some maps and two or three small notebooks, some of which lay open on the sidewalk. The First Investigator tried to look at the documents as much as possible without being noticed.

“Give it to me,” Dr Svenson hissed and tore one of the notebooks out of Jupiter’s hand, which he was about to put back in the bag. “I can do it. Just get out of here. I’m really not in the mood today to chat about my past with two cheeky boys.”

“But it would only be a very short while,” Jupiter made one last attempt. “We really don’t want to bother you and—”

Maria Svenson had grabbed her bag and put the last books under her arm. Without another word, she went in and slammed the door shut.

3. The Dancing Devil

“Nice woman,” Bob noticed after a few seconds. “Yes, very nice. The trip to Pasadena was really worth it.” He looked at Jupiter questioningly.

“Should we ring the door bell again?”

“Better not. We know what we wanted to know. Let’s go home.”

“We know what we wanted to know?” Bob asked, puzzled. “What did we know? I’d say we know nothing.”

“We know that Maria Svenson has something to hide,” replied Jupiter. “She dropped her bag in horror when I mentioned the name ‘Sphinx’.”

“It could have been a coincidence,” Bob said. “I thought all along she was about to drop her bag.”

“But she didn’t ask what I mean by ‘Sphinx’,” Jupiter said.

“Because she was busy picking up her stuff,” Bob argued. “Sorry, Jupe, but I think you’re seeing more secrets than there are.”

Jupiter kept quiet, but smiled mysteriously. They got into the car and Bob drove off.

“Did you see what kind of books Dr Svenson was carrying?” Bob asked when they were on their way back. “All sorts of things about some islands.”

“Micronesia,” Jupiter confirmed. “A group of islands in the western Pacific Ocean. And there were a lot of maps, too. Sea charts. I ask you—what does an archaeologist want with nautical charts?”

“Interesting question. How would I know?”

“Well, maybe we’ll find out,” Jupe said. “I’ll call Pete first.”

“Why? You think Pete, of all people, knows the answer?”

“No. I want to know if his parents are letting him go out tonight.”

“What is it about tonight?”

Again a grin crept across Jupiter’s face. “Oh yes, I forgot to mention that. We have a date today.”

“With whom?”

“If I’m not mistaken—with Sphinx.”

“What?” Bob turned to stare at Jupiter.

“Hey, watch the road, pal!” Jupe shouted as Bob nearly drove up a kerb.

“With Sphinx?” Bob questioned. “Am I missing something?”

“Could be.”

“Spit it out, Jupe! What do you know that I don’t? And why?”

“Why? Because I’m fortunate to be blessed with a photographic memory. And so, with a quick glance at Dr Svenson’s open appointment book, I was able to memorize everything that was written there.”

“Everything?”

“All right, I admit it, it wasn’t that much.”

“And what was it?”

“In addition to a shopping list, a doctor’s visit and some illegible notes, there is an appointment for this evening at ten o’clock. I have a pretty good feeling that we’re on the right track.”

“What is the appointment?”

“It said: ‘Meet S.’”

“It wasn’t easy to convince my mother that I had to come out tonight. This is the last night before they leave for their vacation. When I told her that you needed me, Jupe, she immediately went into a frenzy.” Pete imitated his mother’s worried tone: “Whenever Jupiter needs you, you get into trouble. I won’t have a moment’s peace when I know you’re involved in another dangerous matter.”

“Sounds just like Aunt Mathilda,” the First Investigator thought. “But we need you. Maria Svenson saw Bob’s car and would probably recognize it. Not yours.”

The Three Investigators drove back to Pasadena in Pete’s bright red MG. It was a quarter past nine. Jupiter had suggested that they wait outside Dr Svenson’s house early. After all, they didn’t know whether the mysterious meeting with ‘S’ should take place at her home or somewhere else.

“Over there is Dr Svenson’s car. So she is at home. It’s best if we park a little way from the house. Better safe than sorry.”

While they waited, Bob began to have doubts. “And what if ‘S’ is nothing more than Sandra or Susan? Maybe she’s just seeing her best friend.”

“Then it’s bad luck for us,” replied Jupiter. “But if the ‘S’ stands for Sphinx, then we’ll have a hot lead!”

After about ten minutes, Pete straightened up behind the wheel.
“Someone is leaving the house! Is that her?”

“Yes.” Jupiter watched Maria Svenson get into her car and drive away.
“Come on, Pete, follow her! But quietly, if you please.”

“I know how to do this!” Pete snapped. After all, it wasn’t the first time he’d done something like this. Nevertheless, Jupiter insisted on lecturing him again and again. Nice and calm, with plenty of distance, Pete tailed her.

The journey led them out of Pasadena back to the coast, but this time towards Los Angeles. Slowly the buildings became denser and finally they were in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the urban jungle. Here it was easy to lose sight of the car, but Dr Svenson drove leisurely. Apparently she hadn’t noticed that she was being followed, otherwise she could have easily lost The Three Investigators.

After a good half hour, they reached downtown—the centre of the city, where cafés after cafés lined up, window after window, and where crowds of stylish people pushed their way through the brightly-lit streets to see and to be seen. But Pete did not allow himself to be distracted and followed the archaeologist unperturbed until she finally stopped in front of an office building—an impressive monster of glass and steel that towered a dozen storeys high. Even at this late hour, work was still going on behind some illuminated windows.

Dr Svenson got out of the car and entered the skyscraper through a glass revolving door.

The Three Investigators jumped out of the MG and hurried after her, but just outside the door, Jupiter held back his friends. “We can’t just follow her.”

“Why not?”

“There’s a security guard there.” He pointed through the window into the foyer, where behind a counter sat a man in uniform.

He just spoke to Dr Svenson, then picked up a phone and smiled at her. After he hung up, he pointed to the lift. She walked towards it, pressed a button and waited.

“We have to go after her,” Pete urged. “Otherwise, she’ll disappear right into that huge building!”

“But the guard wouldn’t let us through,” Bob said. “Many offices were closed hours ago. Anyone who wants to get in the building now has to have a good reason.”

“What if we said we left something in the office?” Pete suggested.

“He’ll never believe us,” Jupiter was convinced. While he watched Maria Svenson waiting for the lift, he pinched his lower lip. The lift came, she got in, and from the indicator above the door, Jupiter recognized that it was going up. Four, five, six, seven... to the eighth floor. The light remained there.

“The underground car park!” Jupiter exclaimed.

“Huh?” Pete asked, puzzled.

“This building has underground parking, see? The numbers above the lift door indicate two underground floors. This is definitely more than just a basement.”

“You mean we can get into the building through the underground car park?” Bob asked.

“Right.”

“But there are definitely cameras,” Bob said. “Look, the guard has monitors at his counter! He’d see us right away and probably set off a security alarm or something.”

“Then one of us has to distract him while the other two go to the underground car park as fast as possible.” Jupiter looked Pete right in the eye.

“Me? Why me again?” Pete objected.

“There’s no time to argue. Will you do it?”

Pete weighed the different possibilities for a moment. Would he rather tell the security guard some absurd story or be caught by the same man sneaking through the underground car park? He chose the former. “Okay.”

“Good. The entrance to the car park is probably at the back of the building. Give us two minutes. And then you go in there and distract the guy from his screens for as long as you can. Got it?” Jupiter instructed.

“Got it.”

Jupiter and Bob started running and soon disappeared behind the corner of the building.

Pete looked at his watch. Waited. Looked at the watch again. Waited. Then he took a deep breath once, turned around and entered the revolving door, which automatically started moving, and went into the foyer.

Instantly the street noise was locked out and it was almost unnaturally quiet. Pete calmly continued on as his sneakers made loud squeaks on the polished stone floor of the foyer. He hadn’t gone far yet, when the security

guard's bass voice was already roaring at him: "Can I help you in any way?" The question was not a friendly one.

"I... uh... yes, I... I mean no. I'll be fine, thank you." Pete tried to approach the lift doors as naturally as possible.

"Wait a minute, where are you going?"

"To the... uh... fourth floor," Pete stammered.

"Nobody works on the fourth floor now."

"I know. I was just going to get something that I forgot this afternoon," Pete said. "Well, not me, actually. It's my father. He works there. On the fourth floor."

"And where?"

"At... uh... Winston & Winston." Pete had just caught a glimpse of the plastic plaque on the wall that listed the companies based here.

The brawny security guard narrowed his eyes. He obviously didn't believe a word Pete said. With his index finger, he waved Pete towards him.

Hesitantly, the Second Investigator stepped up to the counter. And he could take a look over the shoulder of the guard at the monitors. They actually showed video shots of the underground car park and the setting changed every few seconds.

Cars... Doors... Cars... Concrete pillars... Cars... Jupe and Bob... Cars...

"And where again?"

"Wh... I beg your pardon?" Pete took his eyes off the screen and fixed on the guard. Was he being mean?

"Where does your father work?"

"In... Accounting," Pete lied and fervently hoped that Winston & Winston also had an accounting department. He had no idea what kind of company it even was.

"And what would you like to get in your father's office?"

"Get his wallet. He left it at the office today and asked me to get it. It's very important, you know. He could of course get them himself tomorrow, but the theatre tickets for tonight are inside and my mother would—"

"—Not want to miss it?"

Pete swallowed. "It's... It's a late night show." He couldn't help himself. He had to look at the monitors one more time. There they were again! They were running towards a steel door. He hoped that that was the entrance to the stairwell, so they would be safe there!

The guard noticed Pete's look and turned around. At the last moment, the picture had jumped to another camera. The security guard seemed to have an idea. He fixed the screens. When one of them showed the steel door again, Jupiter and Bob were not there.

"If your father really does work here, he surely knows very well that after seven o'clock in the evening, anyone who doesn't work here can only come in with an appointment," the security guard said. "Well, let me tell you what. If your story is indeed true, then your father will have to come and get the tickets himself. Now please leave now!"

He didn't have to say that twice. Pete turned back on the spot and went out in a hurry, without looking around. Only when he was back on the street did he breathe again. He turned around and looked up at the shiny façade. Did Bob and Jupe make it?

"Pete seems to have done a good job," Bob remarked as they walked up the stairwell past the door with a big glued-on label that said '6'.

"Otherwise we would have been caught already."

Jupiter did not answer. He did not have the strength. Two more floors. He wouldn't even make two more steps!

They had found the ramp to the underground car park immediately and it had been no problem to get into the stairwell. Far more problematic was the staircase itself—nine floors up—on foot. They had not dared to use the lift, as the security guard would have no doubt noticed.

Groaning, Jupiter dragged himself up the last few steps until they were finally standing in front of the door with the label '8'. The First Investigator leaned panting against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment. He was totally exhausted! Maybe he should have switched roles with Pete after all.

"Hey, how long are we gonna stay here in the stairwell?" Bob asked.

"Okay, okay." Jupiter opened the door a crack and peeked into the corridor. It was only dimly lit. Not a person in sight. There was a sign on the wall with the names of the companies on the floor.

"An advertising agency, a law firm, an online company, another law firm—aha, what have we here? 'EthnoArt—Artworks from All Over the World'. Seems to be some kind of art trade. I'd say this is the first place we should try our luck."

They followed the sign and went left down the corridor. Not a sound could be heard, even the sound of their footsteps was swallowed by the

thick grey carpet. No one seemed to be working on this part of the floor—no telephone ringing, no computer keyboard clicking, no humming of a photocopier, it was dead quiet. Until finally, soft voices came to them.

“There’s someone there,” Bob whispered. “It must be the office at the end of the corridor!”

They went up to a glass door with a logo engraved on it—a figure of a red dancing devil, who wrapped itself around the name ‘EthnoArt’. The glass was tinted, so only a few shadows that moved could be made out. Jupiter and Bob pressed themselves against the wall and listened.

“... to vaccination. It is not necessary for the expedition to fail due to insidious malaria.” That was definitely Maria Svenson’s voice!

“Dr Svenson is right. On Makatao, we won’t have a doctor, only our medicine cabinet. So be prepared for any tropical diseases!”

“Malaria will be the least of your problems if the rumours are true, Mr Schwartz,” someone grimly interjected. “I don’t trust Hadden! What if he’s trying to trap us all?” The man spoke with a Spanish accent.

“You’re imagining things, Juan,” said Mr Schwartz. “Mr Hadden wants his items, that’s all. And he’s offering us a lot of money to get it for him. There’s no trap.”

“And what happened to the *Montana*? The ship had the same destination as us—but it’s missing!”

“Nonsense. It’s not missing. We know that the *Montana* has reached the island unharmed.”

“But Professor Phoenix and the others haven’t called for three days!” Juan shouted angrily. “Doesn’t that seem at least a little strange to you?”

“There could be a thousand reasons,” said Dr Svenson. “We realize that this expedition is very different from all the others. But we have no choice. If we want to know what happened to Professor Phoenix and what is behind the mystery of Makatao, we have to board the *Hadden Explorer* in six days’ time and go there.”

“But that’s not the only reason,” added Mr Schwartz. “In the future, Hadden may refuse to give us any assistance if we do not go. And that means the end of Sphinx.”

4. Shoot the Works

Bob gave Jupiter a shot in the ribs. As if he hadn't heard it himself—Sphinx! So it wasn't a myth after all!

"Someone knows the secret," mumbled Juan. "I think it is that young guy!"

"We don't know," said a third man who was not heard earlier. His voice was calm and composed.

"Of course, Olin!" Juan exclaimed. "Hadden doesn't trust us. He's sending one of his men along for surveillance. And I'm sure that that guy knows what's going on at Makatao."

"These speculations are absurd," Schwartz said decidedly. "Besides, they don't get us any further... And we have a lot of work to do."

"Wait a minute," Maria Svenson said hesitantly. "Speaking of surveillance, I had a strange encounter today. Two boys stood outside my door and tried to talk to me about my arrest twelve years ago."

"Why is that?" Schwartz asked.

"I didn't ask them their reasons," Svenson said. "But one of them—a fat obnoxious guy—suddenly started talking about Sphinx. Anyway, I sent them packing."

"Excuse me?" Juan exploded. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I don't know. I didn't react and slammed the door in front of them."

"Who were those guys?" Olin asked.

"I don't know."

"Didn't they introduce themselves?" Olin probed further.

"Yes, but I forgot their names. One had a very common name—Bob or Rob. And the fat one had a strange name. I can't remember. But there were only two boys. I'm sure they're harmless. I just wanted to let you know in case they show up at your house. This job is mysterious enough as it is. Keep your eyes open."

"All right, Dr Svenson. Now we should—" Schwartz began.

"Nothing is fine!" cried Juan. "Can't you see what's happening? Someone is after us!"

“It was just two boys, Juan!” Schwartz cleared his throat loudly. “Now I think we should go over the equipment list again.”

Juan snorted angrily. “One moment.” A chair creaked. Footsteps approached the door.

Jupiter and Bob looked at each other in panic. There was nowhere to hide in the entire corridor! Bob jumped to the nearest door and pushed the handle down. It was locked. There was no other choice—go back down the corridor! They sprinted off. They almost seemed to reach the next corner before Juan opened the door. But only almost.

“Hey! Stop!” Juan yelled. The two jumped into the next corridor and ran to the stairwell door. Next to it was the lift.

There were voices behind them: “Two boys! One’s a clumsy fat one! That must be them!”

At least two people ran after them. Jupiter knew that if he escaped by the stairs, he had no chance. He hit the lift button. If the lift hadn’t been used since Dr Svenson’s arrival, it would be still on that floor. The door slid to the side. They jumped into the cabin and pressed the button for the underground car park.

“Come on, come on, come on,” Bob muttered, his foot tapping restlessly. “Close the door, you stupid door!”

They could barely catch a glimpse of Juan coming around the corner as the door closed. The black-haired man banged against it, but by then, the cabin was already going down.

“He’ll take the stairs!” Bob cried.

“We’re too fast, he won’t catch us,” said Jupiter.

“What about the other lift?” Bob said.

Jupiter gritted his teeth. “That one will take some time to go to them. We better not take any risks. Once we’re down, we’ll sprint to out to Pete’s car and get out of here.”

Bob moaned. “Thank goodness Dr Svenson didn’t see us. She would have recognized us in a second.”

“Juan probably saw us and describe us to her,” Juve said. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter now.”

One more floor. That’s when it occurred to Bob. “What are we gonna do about the security guard? He’ll see us on the monitors!”

“All the more reason to hurry!” Juve cried.

They jumped out of the lift cabin and ran through the underground concrete bunker to the ramp that led back to the street. Pete waited for

them there, nervously pacing up and down in front of his MG.

Suddenly he saw Jupe and Bob running out of the car park. Jupe was shouting: “Start the car! Start the car!”

Pete didn’t need to be told twice. He got into the MG and started the car. A few seconds later, Bob and Jupiter jumped in. The engine was already running.

“What’s wrong? What’s the matter?” Pete asked.

“Don’t ask, get us out of here! Now!” Jupe shouted.

With screeching tyres, they shot off.

“Makatao,” Bob said and slammed a pile of books and photocopies of documents on the desk at Headquarters.

“Hadden,” said Pete looking at the name written on one of Bob’s notes. He grinned, embarrassed. “Sorry, but I just didn’t have time to investigate. You know, my parents left on their vacation today. What a drama! But now I have a storm-free house. And the best part is that my parents won’t be able to know what catastrophic events that I would face until two weeks from now.”

The Three Investigators had met at Headquarters the next afternoon to discuss the results of their investigation.

“How good it was that I did a bit of preliminary work and found out a few little things,” said Jupiter, leaned back and put his fingertips together, as he always did when he prepares for a long lecture. “The mysterious Hadden is apparently Mr Joseph Hadden, head of Hadden Industries.”

“Hadden Industries?” Bob asked. “That means something to me. I’m just not sure what it is.”

“The company produces plastics,” replied Jupiter. “And has its fingers in just about everything—computer technology, the automobile industry, packaging and so on. Actually, it’s an industrial company like any other... with one exception—it hasn’t been around for very long, and yet within a few years, it has managed to become the absolute market leader in California. Mr Hadden is a very ambitious man who leaves nothing to chance. Some business magazine named him the most successful entrepreneur of the year.”

“Why are you so sure that yesterday was about this Hadden of all people and not another one?” Pete asked.

“Because Joseph Hadden also owns several ships with which he exports his products abroad,” Jupiter said. “It took a while and I had to

phone a lot of people asking unpleasant questions, but I finally found out that one of his ships is called *Hadden Explorer*.”

“The ship they spoke of yesterday!” cried Bob. “So we’re dealing with a rich businessman who’s sponsoring an expedition to Makatao for the people of Sphinx to do something for him there.”

“Well,” Pete sighed. “Only what?”

“What did you find out about this island, Bob?” Jupiter asked.

“Not much, and I’m not sure that’s going to help us.”

“Begin!” Jupe instructed.

“Makatao is an island in Micronesia.”

“Micronesia!” Jupiter whistled through his teeth. “Dr Svenson had books and maps of Micronesia in her bag, remember?”

“Yes,” Bob continued. “Micronesia is a subregion of Oceania, composed of thousands of small islands in the western Pacific Ocean. Politically, the islands of Micronesia are divided between six sovereign nations, one of which is known as the Federated States of Micronesia—with over six hundred of the islands. It’s a bit confusing here as the name ‘Micronesia’ can refer to the Federated States or to the region as a whole. For our purpose, I shall use ‘Micronesia’ to refer to the Federated States.”

“Uhh...” Pete remarked.

“It was settled some four thousand years ago. Following World War II, it was administered by the US until 1990 when they achieved independence.”

“Uhh...” It was Pete again.

“Many of the islands are volcanic in origin, and they are grouped into four states—the largest of which is Pohnpei, where the largest town, Kolonia, is located.”

“Do we have to know so much detail—” Pete wondered.

“I just wanted to give you a little perspective,” Bob said.

The First Investigator smiled softly.

“All right,” Pete said. “I’m in the picture. But a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean would have been quite enough. What about this Makatao thing?”

“It was so difficult to find out anything about it. Of the many islands there, it took me an hour alone to realize that Makatao is one of them. But then things got interesting...”

“Shoot!” Jupe said excitedly.

“The island is now uninhabited. But there are traces of civilization on it.”

“Traces?” Jupe asked.

“Yes. That’s not entirely clear. The island hasn’t been trodden on for decades.”

“Why is that?” Pete wondered.

“Because it is a kind of sanctuary. Look!” Bob reached for one of the books he’d brought from the library and turned to a marked page. “In this book, it says that on Makatao, there were ruins of an ancient people long lost and forgotten. However, these ruins have never been properly explored.”

“And why not?” Pete asked.

“Because it is forbidden to enter the island. There’s some kind of curse on it.”

“Oh, oh. All right, I don’t want to know any more,” Pete said.

“I do,” Jupe countered. “Go on, Bob.”

“The Micronesians are a very superstitious people. In one of their many languages, Makatao means ‘Island of Death’. They believe that their ancestors built a holy place there, a kind of home for the souls of their dead. Even today the natives are convinced that the spirits of their ancestors live on Makatao. They have enforced that no one may enter the island, so that the peace of the dead is not disturbed. And since Makatao is quite small and so many islands there, one more or less doesn’t matter, so the government has respected this wish.”

“And what about the ruins?” Jupe asked.

“That is the big question. The articles I found contradict each other on this point. In some, it says that the legends of the natives are true. They speak of a mystical cult site that the forgotten people had built to worship their ancestors. Elsewhere, it is said that the alleged ruins are nothing more than a random rock formation.

“And then there are the articles claiming that the ruins of Makatao are just a myth. There is nothing there and there never has been. All accounts of an ancient cult site are modern-day legends.”

“Strange,” Jupiter wondered and pinched his lower lip. “Legends like these don’t just happen. Why would someone make up stories about ruins when they don’t exist in reality? It all seems very mysterious to me.”

Bob nodded thoughtfully. “An enigma. That’s what it is. The more I read about Makatao, the more mysterious this island became to me.

There's some mystery there, I'm sure of it. And someone's trying to keep something secret."

"Keep secret?" Pete repeated in amazement. "What makes you think that?"

"If I put all the reports and articles I have discovered in a chronological order, it seems that only in the last three or four years has anyone tried to play down the mystery of Makatao. One might even say it is to cover it up."

"Who?" Pete went into it. "Who wants to cover this up?"

"I don't know."

The First Investigator frowned. "How could anyone be capable of keeping something so huge a secret? And more importantly, what?"

"That's what the people of Sphinx are wondering," Pete surmised. "If what we know about this group is true, it's about the ruins. They want to find out if it really exists and what it is all about."

"And then we have Joseph Hadden," Bob added. "So what we now know is that he has already sent his first ship there. Now he is sending his second ship. Clearly, there is something very valuable there for him to shoot the works on these two trips to Makatao. In return, he probably gets a share of the treasure chests full of gold and gems that are found."

"Sounds logical," Jupiter agreed. "But is that what our mystery client wants to know? How does the warning that someone will die fit into the whole story?"

"Maybe it was just a threat," Bob suggested. "Maybe the client was afraid we wouldn't take the case seriously enough."

"Possible," the First Investigator admitted. "But I think there's more to it than that. Remember what that Juan guy said? That a ship called *Montana* has already reached the island. And that contact with the crew has been broken off for several days. We still don't have all the information we need to put the puzzle together. In five days, the *Hadden Explorer* goes out. By then we should have figured out what this is really about."

"And how are we gonna do that? We can't venture near Maria Svenson anymore," Bob asked. "And I'm not too keen on a second encounter with Juan either. They both saw us and would recognize us immediately."

"You got that right. And that's why we're gonna stick to Hadden himself and find out more about him. Shadow him. If Juan's suspicions are

justified, Hadden's the only one who really knows what's going on. We should be able to confirm that soon."

Jupiter Jones cleared his throat and knocked on the door. No answer. He waited for five seconds and then carefully pushed the handle down.

The secretary at the reception was young. She was wearing headphones and was typing a text dictated on a voice recorder. She stared intently at her monitor without noticing Jupiter. On her desk was a name tag—"Barbara Jefferson". Further in from the cool reception area was an unmistakable expensive door. That has to be the entrance to the inner sanctum of the building—Joseph Hadden's office.

Jupiter cleared his throat again. Miss Jefferson winced and pulled her headphones off. "Yes, please?"

"Good afternoon. My name is Jupiter Jones. I'm here to see Mr Hadden."

She frowned and looked irritated at a fully written appointment book. "Jones? I'm sorry, but I didn't note an appointment here. When is your appointment with Mr Hadden?"

"Uh..." Jupiter put on a stupid face and spoke extra slowly. "Appointment? Well, actually, I didn't have an appointment."

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do without an appointment." From the sound of her voice, Jupiter could tell she wasn't sorry at all. That was one of her standard phrases, which she repeated a dozen times a day.

She turned back to her voice recorder and the computer. After a few moments, she noticed that Jupiter was still standing in the reception area and making no attempt to leave.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Could... could I maybe get one appointment?"

"What is it all about?"

"I would like to interview Mr Hadden."

"An interview?"

"For my school paper. Because he's such a successful man. And a role model for every aspiring student who wants to make it in life."

Miss Jefferson's face twitched a little. "I don't know if—"

The phone cut her off. "One moment. Hadden Industries, Jefferson speaking. How can I help you? ... I beg your pardon? ... My car?"

Jupiter was curious whether she would jump up immediately and run out or ask him politely to leave first. It was a mix of the two. "I'll be right

out,” Miss Jefferson quickly muttered, then grabbed her bag and rushed to the door.

“Sorry, kid, emergency. Just call and make an appointment, all right?”

She never even heard the ‘Yes, ma’am’ reply from Jupiter. She ran out to the lift landing which was on the fifth floor, but found that the lift was at the tenth floor. Then she decided not to wait for it to come down but to run down the staircase. Quickly, she took a look back to see if Jupiter had left the office. She saw him come out to the lift landing and the next moment, she rushed to the staircase.

As soon as she went round the corner of the corridor, the First Investigator turned around, went back into the reception area and closed the door. He did not have much time. As soon as Miss Jefferson arrived down in the parking lot, she would find that her car was still intact where she had parked it, and not towed away, as the police officer had claimed over the phone. Actually, it was not a police officer but Bob in a disguised voice.

Jupiter estimated that she’d be back in four minutes at the most, so he had to hurry. He crept over to the secretary’s desk and took a look at the computer screen. It was a letter to some company in Nevada. It was not particularly revealing. Then he opened the drawer. Tape, paper clips, staplers, highlighters and nicely designed envelopes with the Hadden Industries logo.

What did he expect? Even a glance at the filing shelves did not help him. This was a well-run company full of conscientious and ambitious employees. They dealt in plastics. Not drugs or guns or stolen treasure. And even if it did, Jupiter doubt he’d find the clues at the secretary’s desk.

His gaze fell on the desk calendar Miss Jefferson had consulted. It was written all over it. But there was one thing that Mr Hadden seemed determined to stick to—him leaving at 6 pm. Jupiter skimmed the entries, flipping back and forth. It was too much to remember, even for him. Quickly he grabbed the calendar, took it to the photocopier and put the double page for yesterday and today on the glass surface. The rattling of the copier seemed deafeningly loud to him.

Involuntarily he turned around and fixed his eyes on the two doors in the corridor and into Mr Hadden’s office. Someone could walk out at any moment!

Jupiter called himself inwardly to order. What nonsense! The noise from the photocopier wouldn’t matter as it could be Miss Jefferson using

it. Despite his fear of being discovered, Jupiter couldn't resist the temptation and turned the calendar over. He copied another page. And another one. Finally, he had made a copy of the entire week. Hurriedly, he folded the pages together and put them in his pocket. He put the calendar back on the table.

Time to go! But just as he was about to leave the office, he again became aware of the muffled voice from the next room. What if he put his ear to the door... He couldn't let that chance slip away.

Jupiter crept over and listened. He only heard one voice. Hadden seemed to be on the phone. But apart from a muffled mumbling and a few short yes's and no's, nothing else could be heard. Then the conversation was over.

Jupiter was about to turn away when suddenly someone spoke in a dark voice directly behind him! "Miss Jefferson, would you please send the car around?"

5. The Ghost Town

The First Investigator jumped and whirled around in panic. There was no one here. He breathed a sigh of relief. It was Mr Hadden's voice coming from the intercom. "Miss Jefferson?"

Miss Jefferson was checking on her car. And she certainly should not have left her workplace without telling him.

"Hello? Are you there?"

Jupiter heard a creaking chair, then footsteps. Hadden was coming out! The First Investigator dashed back to the reception area, but he was only halfway across when Mr Hadden's door opened. As if rooted, he stopped and looked around the office as casually as possible.

"Who are you? And where is Miss Jefferson?"

The First Investigator turned around. Hadden was tall—taller than Jupiter by a head and a half. His black suit was impeccable, his cuff links were shiny and at first glance, he looked like a model for the cover of a business magazine. Everything about him radiated authority.

Nevertheless, there was something in his face that didn't really fit the image of the tough businessman—the mischievous glint in the eyes, the laugh lines... something made Joseph Hadden a thoroughly likeable man.

"Oh, good afternoon. Are you Mr Hadden?"

"I am."

"My name is Jupiter Jones. I... I actually wanted... to make an appointment with your secretary. But... but she had to go out in a hurry." This time Jupiter's stutter was real.

"An appointment? What is it about?"

"An interview for my school paper."

Mr Hadden smiled in amusement. "For your school paper? Why would a school newspaper be interested in me?"

"Because..." It didn't matter anymore. Jupiter could go on playing the idiot. Whether he had the secretary in front of him or Joseph Hadden himself, what difference would it make? "Because you are such a successful man... and a role model for any aspiring student who wants to make it in life."

Now Hadden laughed. It was a natural, sympathetic laugh. “If you promise not to use that sentence in your article, you’re welcome to interview me.”

The door opened. Miss Jefferson came in. “Mr Hadden! Excuse me, I... I had to step out for a moment. It was something about my car... or rather, it was nothing about my car. Someone’s playing a joke.”

She turned to Jupiter. “You’re still here. Didn’t I tell you—”

“It’s all right, Miss Jefferson. I was just about to call it a day, but I’ve got a few minutes till the car gets here. Come on in my office, son, and you can ask me a few questions.”

“Thank you, Mr Hadden.”

“Please call the driver, Miss Jefferson!”

Jupiter followed the head of Hadden Industries into his office.

“An interview? He gave you an interview?” Pete shook his head. “No way!”

“That wasn’t my plan at all!” Jupiter defended himself. “Who expected that he really had time for a school newspaper reporter!”

The Three Investigators were standing on the street in downtown Los Angeles in front of the Hadden Industries building. It was here that Bob called Miss Jefferson.

“And what did you ask him?”

“Well, nothing important. I had to be careful not to reveal our intentions, so I asked a few irrelevant questions and acted awfully nervous so he wouldn’t notice.”

“So, what’s your impression?” Bob wanted to know.

“Well... he’s very nice. Not at all how I imagined him to be. After the first impression, I almost have the feeling that we’re on the wrong track. But it’s still a little early to judge.”

“What does it say on the copies you made?” Bob asked.

“I haven’t looked at them yet. Because now there are more important things to do. Hadden is about to leave. He’s being picked up by a driver. I suggest we follow him.”

“What’s the point?” Pete asked.

“We’ll see about that. We could even find out where he lives. It can’t hurt.”

They went over to Pete’s MG, got in and watched the building. It was not long before Joseph Hadden stepped out of the building with a thick

briefcase in his hand, looked down the street and waited. The Three Investigators ducked involuntarily.

Half a minute later, the driver arrived.

“I can’t believe my eyes!” Jupiter gasped.

It wasn’t just any car that Hadden was picked up in. Black body, polished to a high sheen, gold trimmings, and an elaborately curved hood ornament. It was an old Rolls-Royce. And it wasn’t just any driver who got out to open the door for Mr Hadden.

“That’s Worthington!” Jupiter exclaimed.

The tall Englishman with the flawless black suit, in which his posture seemed even stiffer than it already was, held the back door open and waited for Mr Hadden to enter. Then he closed the door, adjusted his chauffeur’s cap and circled the Rolls-Royce to take his place in the elegant driver’s seat. Everything about him was somehow elegant. And stiff at the same time. Very English. Unmistakably Worthington.

The Three Investigators had known the chauffeur since they started their detective work. Then, Jupiter had won the use of the Rolls-Royce with chauffeur services for thirty days in a competition organized by the Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency. When the time was up, a grateful client had shown his gratitude to the three detectives by financing the further use of the Rolls-Royce—indefinitely. Since Bob and Pete had their own car, they only used the Rolls on special occasions but Worthington had become a friend to them over time. As a professional or as a friend, the chauffeur never abandoned his distinguished manner.

“Worthington is Hadden’s driver, I can’t believe it,” Pete said stunned.

“This is excellent!” cried Jupiter. “It could not have come any better. I’m sure Worthington can tell us all about Mr Hadden’s activities of late!”

“Well, what now?” Pete asked as the Rolls-Royce began to move.

“Let’s go after them as planned,” Juve decided.

Pete followed Hadden right through the crowded streets of the city centre. He kept so much distance that neither Worthington nor Hadden could suspect anything.

After about ten minutes, they stopped in front of one of the few skyscrapers that stretched towards the sky in Los Angeles. Once again Worthington opened the door to his passenger, nodded goodbye and drove away.

“So what?” Bob asked. “Do we follow Worthington or Hadden?”

“Worthington,” Jupiter decided. “It won’t be very exciting with Hadden, I guess, unless you want to hear him at the door taking a shower. He lives here.”

“How do you know that?” Bob asked.

“From him.” Jupiter smiled. “I asked him where he lived during my witty interview. And instead of the expected Beverly Hills or Malibu Beach, he said downtown. The building looks like an office building. But on the top floors are the finest apartments in the city—with a pool on the rooftop terrace overlooking the Pacific Ocean.”

“All right.” Pete resumed pursuit. But to their amazement, Worthington didn’t go back to the Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency, where he worked.

The Rolls-Royce steered into a grubby neighbourhood with run-down low-rise buildings and half-decayed factory buildings. The sun was still just above the horizon, but it seemed as if even daylight would avoid this gloomy district. After dark, this was definitely not a place to be at.

No one was to be seen on the streets. It was like a ghost town. However, it was impossible to tell if the houses were empty or if the people had barricaded themselves inside to come out only at night.

The Rolls-Royce slowed down and finally stopped in the yard of an abandoned factory. A bizarre picture, Jupiter thought—one of the most noble and expensive vehicles he had ever seen, in front of the dilapidated façade of a factory building that was about to be demolished.

Worthington got out and looked towards them. He didn’t look the least bit surprised. Pete stopped his MG and they got out.

“Hello, Worthington!” cried the Second Investigator, unsettled. “What a coincidence running into you here. How are you?”

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. I’m fine, thanks for asking. However, I think this encounter is less of a coincidence.” Worthington smiled, hardly noticeable.

“You noticed?” Jupiter asked in surprise.

“That you’re following me? As a matter of fact, I did,” the chauffeur replied.

“Well done,” Pete said appreciatively. “I don’t want to brag, but I’m actually pretty good at tailing. Very few people can spot that.”

“I had good teachers, I might add.”

“Why did you come to this ghost town?” Bob asked. “Do you have a passenger here?”

“No. I just thought this place was a good place for a conspiracy meeting. I’m going to assume that today is not about you using my driving services?”

“That’s right, Worthington,” Jupiter admitted. “Forgive us, it was not really our intention to spy on you. It was... It just barely happened.”

Suddenly, the First Investigator began to suspect. “You knew all along you were being followed, but you didn’t tell your passenger about that, did you?”

“No. Why should I?” Worthington said. “After all, I was reasonably certain that the tailing was solely for my benefit. But now, may I know the reason for all this secrecy?”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “Well... actually it wasn’t so much about you as it was about your passenger, Mr Hadden.”

“Mr Hadden?” Worthington raised his eyebrows in surprise. “I do not understand. Is he under investigation?”

Bob nodded. “As of today. Until just now, we had no idea you were his driver.”

“Well, neither did I. He regularly gets a car from Rent-’n-Ride, but unlike most of our customers, he doesn’t care who drives it, as long as it’s done quickly and reliably.”

“Have you driven him much?” Bob asked.

Worthington hesitated. “I’m not sure I’m authorized to talk about that. The car rental company guarantees not only highest driving comfort and safety, but also customers’ privacy.”

“Come on, Worthington,” Pete said. “We don’t expect you to disclose top-secret information.”

“I have chauffeured him occasionally.”

“Could you perhaps tell us a little more about his destinations?” Jupe probed.

“That, unfortunately, is out of the question.” He shook his head decidedly. “May I ask why you’re so interested in Mr Hadden?”

“Let’s put it this way,” Jupiter began. “He has crossed the path of our investigation in a new case.”

“You mean he’s a suspect in a crime?”

“We don’t know for sure yet,” Bob confessed. “To be honest, there hasn’t been any crime so far—just a handful of mysterious clues... So it would be good if you could help us.”

“I’m sorry. As much as I’d like to help you, I have to be loyal to all my clients. It’s the number one rule in my line of work. A chauffeur is more than just an expensive cab driver. A chauffeur must be open to everyone and at the same time exercise discretion.”

Jupiter nodded. He understood Worthington’s reasoning. Worthington was by far the most prim and proper person Jupiter had ever met. If his order was to keep silent about his passengers, he obeyed it.

Thoughtfully, he pulled the copies of Hadden’s diary out of his pocket while Pete and Bob continued to talk to Worthington.

“But you could at least tell us whether Mr Hadden has been driven to the EthnoArt company in the last few days,” suggested Bob.

“No, I can’t. Or how would you like it if I tell your destinations to my next customer?”

“We’re not nosing around,” said Pete. “But perhaps your information could help prevent a crime.”

Worthington hesitated. “If you can prove to me that Mr Hadden is indeed involved in a crime, I will consider it. However, until then, I must abide by my code of honour. But between you and me, I do not know what case you are working on, but I think Mr Hadden is a very decent and honest man. I might even go as far as to suggest that you to look around for another suspect.”

He looked at his watch. “Now if you’ll excuse me, my next passenger is waiting. I have never been late in my entire career and I would hate to break that tradition. Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“Likewise, Worthington,” Pete said, crestfallen.

“Oh, may I ask you something else, Worthington?” said Jupiter, when the chauffeur was already sitting in the car and was about to close the door. “Do you have any plans for tonight?”

“Please? I don’t understand.”

“Tonight, around 10 pm.”

Worthington frowned. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I’m not free at that time.”

“Do you have to work?”

The wrinkles deepened. “That’s how it is.”

The First Investigator shrugged. “Too bad. Have a nice day. Have a good trip.”

“What was that all about?” Pete asked after the Rolls-Royce had left. “Did you want to invite him in for a glass of wine to make him talk?”

“Wrong, Pete. I just wanted to find out if we can count on Worthington’s help tonight.”

“With his help?” Pete remarked, puzzled. “Well, I guess not. You heard him.”

“Wrong again. He’ll help us.”

“It didn’t sound like that to me,” Bob said.

“Well, look what I found.” Jupiter unfolded one of the copies and pointed to an entry. “Tonight at 10 pm, Hadden has an appointment. And like Maria Svenson, Joseph Hadden... or his secretary, only entered one mysterious letter.”

“Let me guess,” Pete said. “An ‘S’.”

“Exactly.”

“And Worthington has a client tonight at 10 pm!”

6. The Blue Diamond

“Hopefully it won’t take that long,” Bob muttered and drummed on the steering wheel of his Beetle. They had decided to take his car to be less conspicuous. Probably Worthington would notice the pursuit this time too. But he would hardly try to lose them. Secretly he was on their side, Jupiter was quite sure of that.

Jupiter just had to stick to his principles. No, he wasn’t worried about Worthington. Bob’s nervousness worried him, though.

“What’s the matter with you? We got all the time in the world. Nothing’s going to take that long. The vacation has started. You would be well rested.”

“But I’ve got a date,” it finally broke out of Bob.

“When? Tonight?” Jupe asked.

“With Jelena?” Pete asked with a grin. “I don’t know why you keep it such a secret, Bob. I like her!”

Bob said nothing.

“When?” Jupiter asked.

“At 10:30.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked.

“Are you hard of hearing?” Bob exploded. “At 10:30! And that’s exactly why I keep it a secret, Pete. It gets on my nerves that I have to explain myself all the time.”

“You don’t have to,” Jupiter remarked.

“Yes, he has,” Pete countered. “Because you, Jupe, is about to start your what-is-more-important-Jelena-or-our-detective-work sermon.”

Jupiter was silent.

“Okay. Okay. You don’t have to start that. I’ll give you my answer. I care about both! But the date with Jelena has been set for three days. We want to celebrate the last day of school. So I’m gonna leave soon, okay?”

“All right, all right, I won’t say anything.” Jupiter had to admit to himself that Bob was right. He probably would have said something like that as well.

Fortunately, the unpleasant conversation was interrupted by Pete. “Look at that, fellas, here we go! The Rolls-Royce is in front of the apartment! You were right, Jupe, it really is Worthington! And here comes Hadden. He must have been waiting in the lobby.”

The businessman came out of the building in a black coat and got into the car. Worthington closed the door and drove off.

“Let’s go,” Bob said, turning the ignition key.

Again the drive through Los Angeles at night was quite short. After only ten minutes, Worthington stopped in front of the magnificent façade of a restaurant called ‘The Blue Diamond’.

“The Blue Diamond,” Bob said, whistling through his teeth. “The likes of us can’t even get in there with our suits and ties on. I think it’s some kind of a club. You have to be in high society to be allowed to eat there... not to mention paying.”

“One thing is certain,” said Pete. “Mr Hadden is having a good time. Man, what a place! Well, fellas, I guess this is the end of our tailing. We’re never going to get into that place.”

Hadden got out and Worthington drove away while The Three Investigators watched the businessman.

“We are lucky,” remarked Jupiter. “He’s seated at a table by the window. We may not be able to eavesdrop, but we can at least observe him.”

“And what’s the point?” Pete asked.

“For example, when he meets Maria Svenson, we are certain that the mysterious ‘S’ was actually meant to be ‘Sphinx’.”

“Or ‘Svenson’.” Pete added.

“Right,” Jupe agreed.

“Or something else completely different,” Pete suddenly said with a sound in his voice that Jupiter didn’t like at all.

“What do you think, Pete?”

“Weren’t you looking?” Pete said.

“Look where?” Jupe replied. “I am watching Hadden.”

“Someone just went into The Blue Diamond. Someone I would have expected to be the very last person here. Someone I would’ve been convinced never to be let into this place.”

“Spit it out, Pete!” Bob exclaimed.

“Oh, my goodness!” Jupe shouted. “This can only be a bad joke! Look!”

A tall, lanky young man in an almost well-fitting suit had approached Mr Hadden and offered him his hand. Hadden ignored him. Somewhat irritated, the newcomer took a seat. His face was pale, he seemed uncertain. This was unusual. Until now, The Three Investigators had seen him as nothing more than a pretentious loud-mouth. Because there was absolutely no doubt that they knew this person—better than they liked.

“I’m throwing up,” Bob gasped, stunned. “I’ll eat a broom. I can’t believe it! I’m dreaming!”

“You’re not dreaming, Bob,” Jupiter said. “So the enigmatic ‘S’ in Hadden’s schedule doesn’t stand for Sphinx or Svenson... but for Skinny Norris!”

“Who the devil is Skinny Norris?”

Pete and Jupiter stared at Jelena, then to Bob.

“You never told her about Skinny?” Pete said to Bob.

“He hasn’t told me a lot of things yet,” replied Jelena and winked at Bob supposedly inconspicuously.

The conversation between Hadden and Skinny had ended after only ten minutes and Skinny had left the restaurant.

Then The Three Investigators drove back to Rocky Beach. Bob had allowed his friends to accompany him to the ice cream parlour where he had an appointment with Jelena. They were all still much too excited to go home.

Jelena had looked a bit irritated, but then immediately jumped at the news in the Sphinx case. But this was the moment when she could no longer understand all the excitement. Skinny Norris? Who could that be?

“Skinny is pretty much the most annoying guy I have ever met,” Pete said in disgust.

“A terrible pain in the butt,” Bob added. “And a dangerous one at that.”

“An unmatched enemy,” Jupiter added.

“Aha,” nodded Jelena. “And why?”

“Where to start?” Pete shredded the paper umbrella in his sundae with sheer aggression. “He’s a dumb, stupid, fool.”

“Sneaky, smug, slimy...”

“Pretentious, self-centred, grudging, selfish...”

“There are not enough words to describe him.”

“Bum.”

“Yes, that too.”

“Bum?” Jelena asked amusedly. “You mean a tramp, a vagrant, a hobo?”

“No,” Pete said. “We mean an idiot.”

“Of regrettably low intelligence,” Jupiter added. “Which, however, does not make it any less exhausting to deal with.”

“And no less wicked!” cried Bob. “Do you remember how many times Skinny got in our way and put us in real danger?”

“How could I forget! Since our very first case, he’s been causing us trouble,” Pete cried. “He simply doesn’t begrudge us of our success. He thinks he’s better than us just because his father’s got money and he’s driving around in a fancy sports car. He’s just... He’s just...”

“All right, all right,” Jelena said and raised her hands defensively. “I think I get the picture. You don’t like him very much. And what does that tell us about the case?”

“That Hadden must be up to something fishy,” Pete was convinced. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be meeting with Skinny.”

“Take it easy,” Jupiter warned. “Skinny may be a bad guy, but he’s no felon.”

“How do you know?” Pete asked. “We haven’t heard from him in a long time. Who knows what he’s been up to in that time?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions,” Juve warned. “Skinny is not intelligent enough to take on a savvy businessman like Hadden. Didn’t you see how nervous he was at The Blue Diamond? It looked like Hadden gave him a good talking to. Anyway, Skinny was getting smaller and quieter until he finally ran off like a whining dog.”

“Skinny is definitely nowhere near Hadden’s league,” Pete said and stroked his hair thoughtfully.

“Do you think he has something to do with this case?” Bob wondered. “With Sphinx, I mean? His meeting with Hadden could have been for a completely different reason.”

“Hard to say,” replied Jupiter. “But we should be able to find out by tailing him.”

“Another tail?” Pete moaned. “Will it ever end? Dr Svenson, Mr Hadden, and now Skinny Norris?”

“He is the next lead we have,” Jupiter said calmly. “Apart from the *Hadden Explorer*, of course.”

“The ship?” Pete asked.

“Right,” Jupe affirmed. “We should check it out and see what goes on in it—whether it’s being loaded, who’s boarding, and so on. It’s due to sail in five days. By then we should have found out exactly what kind of expedition they’re talking about.”

“Damn,” murmured Jelena. “I’d so like to join in.”

The Three Investigators looked at her. Although they had had their difficulties at first with Jelena’s quick-temper and very direct manner—especially to Jupiter—she had become a good friend to them, especially to Bob. And although Jupiter had repeatedly spoken out against involving Jelena in their cases, he knew that she had been a great help to them on several occasions. And they could well use help in this confusing case.

But Jelena’s options were limited. She couldn’t lie in ambush and tail Skinny Norris... or sneak into an office building unnoticed or follow someone by car.

Jelena was paraplegic and had been dependent on a wheelchair since childhood. Normally she coped well with her disability. But in moments like these, she was extremely annoyed that she could not go hunting with The Three Investigators. Frustrated, she slapped her palms against the armrests of her wheelchair, but her anger disappeared as quickly as it had come. “Stupid again and again,” she murmured.

Jupiter bit his lips. When they first met, he hated Jelena. Now she was for him a kind of ally and opponent at the same time. Actually, it would have been Bob’s job now to cheer Jelena up. But if there was one thing Jelena hated, it was pity. So Bob held back.

“You can still help us,” The First Investigator said.

“No poor-Jelena-need-to-do-something jobs, okay?”

Jupiter took a deep breath once. Now he knew again why he had disliked her. “I wasn’t going to suggest that you clean up our headquarters. But whatever you say.”

“Tell me!” demanded Jelena in a half defiant, half conciliatory tone.

“You’re good at making phone calls,” Jupe said.

“This is the only activity where people doesn’t see that I’m in a wheelchair,” she snapped. “And then I would be taken seriously. Amazing, right?”

“Your sarcasm is getting on my nerves,” Jupiter gave back. “Do you want to get into this or not?”

“Yes.”

“Then find out if a Hadden Industries ship called *Montana* has left for Micronesia in the last few weeks, specifically, Makatao, although I doubt that destination is listed anywhere,” Jupiter instructed. “Try to find out who was on board, if anything unusual was loaded, when the ship was due back and what happened to the crew—because something has happened if Juan was telling the truth.”

“No problem,” assured Jelena. Her mood had suddenly improved. The slightly pretentious undertone had returned when she said: “It’s a piece of cake.”

The blue sports car stopped with squeaking tyres in front of a house in Santa Monica. Skinny Norris got out of the car swinging over the door instead of opening it. He looked up and down the street and then ran with springy steps towards the house. One leap over the low hedge and he was at the door. He pulled out a key and disappeared into the house immediately afterwards.

Bob and Pete, who had ducked into Bob’s car, slowly straightened up.

“Great first day of vacation,” muttered Pete. “We went to Skinny’s place, waited more than an hour for him to get up comfortably at noon, waited even longer until he left his house, almost lost him on the coast road because he drove like crazy, and finally ended up in Santa Monica, where he disappeared into a house and we can’t follow him anymore.”

“But we can find out who he is visiting. And what’s even more interesting—to which house, apart from his parents’, he has his own key!”

“You got that right,” Pete agreed. “Who is going?”

“Always the one who asks.”

The Second Investigator sighed. “All right.” He squeezed himself out of the Beetle and immediately scampered into the shade of a tree. He wanted to watch the house for a few more minutes. It was possible that Skinny could come out at any moment. But when there was no movement at the door or behind the windows, Pete left his cover and approached the house.

There was no mailbox on the street, so he had to come up to the front door to read the name of the occupant at the doorbell. One last time, he watched all windows for suspicious movements. Then he sharpened, jumped up the three small steps to the entrance and took a look at the sign.

He was about to turn around and return to Bob as quickly as possible when suddenly the front door opened. Pete jumped behind some bushes,

ducked and held his breath.

Skinny stepped out. Did he see Pete? Obviously not, because he locked the door without hesitation. Then he reached into the inside pocket of his show-off jacket and pulled out a mobile phone. He dialled a number and waited. Then he cleared his throat and said softly, but barely audible to Pete: "Time's running out."

That was all. Skinny put the phone back into his pocket, jogged to his blue speedster, got in and took off.

"But now let's get after him," Pete growled and started sprinting as soon as he was sure that Skinny couldn't see him in the rear view mirror. Bob had already started the engine and accelerated even before Pete had closed the door completely.

"Damn! Skinny turned off right there! I hope I can catch him!" Bob put his turn signal on, turned right—and saw a deserted road ahead of him. Not a blue sports car in sight. The Beetle roared past the next junction, eyes were everywhere, but Skinny's car cannot be seen.

"Trouble! We've lost him!" Bob slapped the steering wheel furiously, then turned to Pete. "So much for our pursuit. Jupe won't be happy."

"Whatever." The Second Investigator shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway, I'm fed up with all this sneaking around. Let's go back to Rocky Beach!"

"Did we actually do anything? Who lives in that house?"

"Well, you won't believe this," Pete remarked. "The sign at the door said 'Barbara Jefferson'."

"Hadden's secretary?" Jupiter raised his eyebrows in surprise when Pete told him about their successes and failures half an hour later at Headquarters.

"What's Skinny doing there?" Jupe pondered. "And why on earth does he have a key to her house?"

"She would hardly have given him one willingly," Pete said. "Perhaps he stole it from her. I told you Skinny was up to something. Wherever he shows up, he brings only trouble!"

"Mysterious," muttered Jupiter. "Very enigmatic. First Hadden, now Miss Jefferson. Why is Skinny sneaking around Hadden Industries?"

"Oh yes, there was something else," Pete remembered. "I overheard a phone call that Skinny made when he was just outside the door."

"And you're only saying that now?" Jupe asked.

“Well, it wasn’t a real phone call. And it probably didn’t mean anything. But you always say every little thing could be important, Jupe, so I better tell you.”

“Who was he talking to?” Jupe asked.

“I don’t know. In fact, he called someone and said only one sentence: ‘Time is running out’. Then he hung up and left.”

Bob raised his hands helplessly, but Jupiter was frozen.

“Time is running out?” Jupiter repeated.

“That’s what he said,” Pete affirmed.

The First Investigator’s facial expression changed from complete amazement to slight horror until his face finally darkened and he looked into the void, extremely angry and his chin stretched out.

“Skinny Norris!” Jupe shouted.

“What’s the matter, Jupe?” Bob asked worriedly.

“We’ve been fooled from the beginning!”

“From the beginning?” Bob asked. “What do you mean?”

Instead of answering, Jupiter turned to his desk and pressed a button on the answering machine. “I went out for a moment to help Uncle Titus at the salvage yard. That was about half an hour ago. During which time our mysterious client called and left one of his warnings on the answering machine.”

Jupiter played back the message. The voice was distorted and dark, but unmistakably said: “Time is running out!”

7. Voices From Nowhere

“He set us up from the start!” cried Pete angrily and not for the first time. In the past half hour, he had said this sentence at least a dozen times in various degrees of outrage. But still his anger had not gone away.

Bob and Jupiter felt the same way. But unlike Pete, they had become increasingly quiet.

“Say something, Jupe!” Pete demanded angrily. “You’re silent again. You don’t mind that Skinny was the mysterious voice from nowhere? That he fooled us?”

“No. I’m just looking into that claim.”

“What claim?”

“That Skinny fooled us.”

“What’s there to look?” Pete exclaimed. “He took us for a ride! Who can imagine this disgraceful act?”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Come on, Jupe, with your superior intellect, surely you can see that!” The First Investigator waved away.

“I’m talking about Skinny,” Jupe said. “Why would he play a trick on us? It doesn’t make sense. Especially since it obviously wasn’t a prank. Sphinx really exists. Skinny didn’t lie to us about that. So the question is: ‘What does he want from us?’”

Bob frowned. “Do you think he’s serious about all this? And he really wants to use our detective services?”

“It’s possible,” Jupe replied.

“Never,” Pete objected. “Skinny has never taken us seriously. He’d cut off his right hand before hiring us...” He faltered. The cogwheels in his head started to turn.

“Well? It’s interesting what you just said, Pete,” Jupiter remarked amusedly. “He would rather cut off his right hand than hire us, of all people, as detectives. Or he would, if he wanted to keep his right hand, pretend to be someone else and contact us by phone in a disguised voice. That way he saves face and we do the dirty work for him. Then he can use the information we get for him to continue his evil deeds.”

“You really think so?” Bob asked. “Do you think we’ve been helping him with some criminal stuff all this time?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Jupe decided. “I’ve had enough of the sneaking around. Let Skinny tell us himself what he’s up to. We have to make the bird sing.”

“Skinny? A bird?” Pete laughed bitterly. “Certainly not. If Skinny’s any kind of animal, it’s more likely a serpent—specifically, a two-headed serpent.”

“All right. Then let’s make the serpent sing,” Bob added.

The last bit of reddish twilight shimmered in the western sky, while in the east, the first stars were already twinkling. It was nine o’clock. The Three Investigators had been lying in wait in front of the Norris family’s property for over an hour, waiting for Skinny to leave the house. After all, today was the first day of vacation—he would definitely not spend this evening alone in his pad. Their patience was put to the test, but then something happened at the front door.

“At last,” Pete whispered. He was instantly on alert in his hiding place behind the thick oak tree. “I thought Skinny wasn’t going out at all today.”

Skinny Norris stepped out the door, took a deep breath and jogged to his blue sports car in his usual casual manner.

“Quick, Jupe, the phone!” Pete said.

The First Investigator took their mobile phone out of his pocket and dialled. Finding Skinny’s number had been easy—he had left it on the answering machine of his landline. There was a beeping noise nearby. It was in Skinny’s pocket.

Skinny slowed down, took out the phone and held it to his ear. “Yeah?”

Jupiter smiled. He listened to Skinny Stereo—once through the mobile phone and once live, just twenty metres away from him. The First Investigator spoke softly and in a muffled voice when he answered: “Solve the puzzle!”

Skinny stopped as if moved by thunder. “What’s that?”

“Solve the puzzle!”

“W... what puzzle? Who is this?”

“That’s the puzzle! Find out who I am!”

“If... if this is a joke, then...” Skinny stammered.

“No joke! Someone will die if you don’t solve the puzzle!”

Skinny hung up. He looked around uncertainly. Jupiter was quite far away, but he could have sworn he saw the fear in Skinny's face. Just as Skinny jumped into the car, Jupiter pressed the redial button.

"Yeah?" A distinct tremor in the voice.

"Driving away won't help you!"

"How did you... how do you know—"

"I can see you."

No sooner had Jupiter said that, Skinny's head whirled around in panic, looking here and there, trying to pierce the shadows near him with glances. But The Three Investigators had wisely chosen a tree far from any street light. Skinny had no chance to see them.

"Get out of the car," demanded Jupiter. Skinny reached for the ignition key. "If you start the engine, you're dead!"

Instantly Skinny's hand flinched back. This time he opened the door of the convertible to get out. "Now what?"

"Go down to the street! Slowly..." Jupiter instructed.

Skinny started to move, getting closer, step by step, with the phone still on his ear. "How far do you want me to go? Hello?"

Jupiter didn't answer as Skinny had walked near to them. But that was no longer necessary. Their old arch enemy was close enough to drop the bomb. The First Investigator broke the connection and stepped out of the shadow of the tree.

"So, Skinny, who am I?"

It was a moment The Three Investigators would never forget—Skinny Norris flinched. He gasped for breath. He turned pale. Then he recognized Jupiter. Then Bob. Then Pete.

And his jaw literally dropped. The moment of total amazement lasted a few wonderful seconds. But then the familiar expression of boundless arrogance returned to his face.

"Jupiter... 'Baby Fatso' Jones," he said scornfully, alluding to the hated role Jupiter had as a child actor in what was then a very popular television series.

"And, of course the two shadows that never leave his side—Pete 'The Coward' Crenshaw and Mr 'Boring' Bob Andrews. What are you three doing here? Shouldn't you be in bed by now?"

Skinny was a bit older than The Three Investigators and thought he was particularly clever when he kept harping on this fact.

“You can imagine that, Skinny,” Pete replied angrily. “We wanted to see our big, dangerous client up close.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about at all,” Skinny replied casually, annoyed.

“Of course you do, Skinny!” hissed Pete. “You called our number and threatened us. You fed us that junk about Sphinx and all that other stuff.”

Skinny waved tiredly and turned to Jupiter. “Tell your friend to stop taking so much drugs in the future, Fatso. It can end badly.” With that, he turned around and walked back to his car.

Pete wanted to go after him, but Jupiter held him back. “Forget it, Pete. You won’t get a word out of him.”

“But why does he deny it?” Pete wondered.

“Because we chose the wrong tactic.” Jupiter thought about it for a moment, then he called out to Skinny, who was about to leave: “Hey, Skinny! If you still want to know about Sphinx and Hadden and Makatao, you have our number!”

Skinny did not answer, but the First Investigator was sure that he had heard him. Then the blue sports car with squealing tyres roared off.

“Okay, do you have something to write or is your memory actually as good as you claim it is?”

“The latter,” said Jupiter coolly, but he still reached for a pen and paper as a precaution. After all, Jelena didn’t need to know that.

“Here’s what I found out. Two weeks ago, one of Hadden’s ships, the *Hadden Montana*, was officially said to deliver some small plastic parts to Canada, but this is not true. In fact, it set off to the west with an unknown destination and has not returned to this day. It was originally expected back two and a half weeks later, but Hadden personally told his staff that the *Hadden Montana* had suffered severe damage in a storm, and was being repaired in a shipyard in Canada. It was uncertain when the ship would be available for further transport. But, you may already have guessed it, that is also a lie. The *Montana* is not being repaired in any Canadian shipyard, and also on any island to the west. But the *Montana* has been missing for two weeks.”

“Phew!” Jupiter said. “How did you find out all this?”

“You really want to know?”

“No details.”

“All right, the short version is, I made some phone calls—half a day yesterday and half a day today. Next time I get the phone bill, my father will behead me. By calling Hadden Industries, I got the name of the ship and its destination. Through a dozen calls to Canada, I learned that the *Montana* never showed up there and was also never expected. It was a little more difficult with the repair yards, but even that is something you can find out if you come up with some good stories to tell people. You know—the unsuspecting father on board the lost *Montana*, who doesn’t know that his wife is in intensive care and whom I therefore urgently need to reach. Sobs!”

“You’re really good at this, Jelena!” Jupiter praised.

“I know. So how are things going over there? Bob told me that Skinny was the mystery man. You guys could’ve figured that out sooner, right?”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. There it was again, there is always a reason why he disliked Jelena, but he swallowed the biting remark on his tongue and told her about their meeting yesterday.

“That doesn’t sound so exhilarating. So what now?”

“Bob and Pete are coming over in a few minutes to discuss how to get to Skinny.”

“Okay, I’m gonna make some more calls. Maybe I can get more out of this. And you know, if you’re at a loss and you lack any criminological inspiration, turn to Jelena.”

Jupiter had just hung up when the phone rang again. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

Two seconds of silence. Then, in an unfeigned, almost embarrassed voice came: “Skinner here.”

“Skinny?” cried Jupiter in surprise and immediately bit his tongue. If he wanted to make Skinny talk, he couldn’t make a mistake now!

But to his astonishment, Skinny relieved him of the difficult task when he said: “We should meet. I need to talk to you.”

8. The Singing Serpent

“Whatever Skinny wants to tell us, I already don’t believe a single word he says,” Pete said determinedly when he entered Headquarters in the late afternoon. “He’s up to something. He’s always up to something!”

“Slow down,” Jupiter warned. “We should wait and see what he has to say, and then decide whether to believe him or not.”

“I don’t have to wait for that,” Pete said furiously. “It’s clear to me. He’s going to tell us a pack of lies. Why else would he suddenly want to talk to us after pretending he knew nothing yesterday?”

“Perhaps because he realized that his reaction was silly,” Jupiter said. “You know, Skinny always takes a little longer to grasp the situation.”

“Why do you even want to listen to him, Jupe?” Bob asked.

“Because I want to know what this whole thing is about!”

Furiously Pete stepped up to the First Investigator and knocked his knuckle on Jupe’s forehead. “Hello? Anybody home? Skinny is our client! Skinny Norris! I’m off the case!” He looked at Jupiter, then Bob. “Say something, Bob!”

Bob raised his hands defensively. “I do not want to argue. But I think Jupe is right. We should listen to Skinny first. Then we can always tell him to go fry an egg.”

Pete clapped his palm against his forehead, but said nothing more. Without Bob’s support he had no chance. Shaking his head, he turned away, paused, and then turned around and said: “But the meeting will not take place here at Headquarters, understand? In the end, he just wants to spy on us!”

“We’ll have a chat outside in the salvage yard,” Jupiter promised and left the trailer to avoid any more confrontations with the Second Investigator.

Outside, he ran into Aunt Mathilda. She seemed a little hectic. “Oh, Jupe, you’re lucky! You can enjoy your vacation.”

“So will you soon. In three days you’re off to Europe! You’re excited?”

“Are you kidding? I haven’t been able to sleep properly for three nights! I keep thinking of things to think about. Then I turn on the light and write them on my list. Your uncle says that if this keeps up, I won’t see Germany at all, because I have to catch up on my sleep for a week.”

Jupiter laughed. “How about you just forget about the list? I know you, Aunt Mathilda, you think of everything even without a list!”

His aunt returned the smile, but suddenly her cheerful face collapsed. She seemed worried. “I don’t like that I have to leave you here alone for so long. If something happens with the house or the business or... Goodness, what if something happens to you! Imagine falling down the stairs and breaking a leg. Who’s gonna—”

“Aunt Mathilda!” Jupe exclaimed. “I’ve never broken my leg. Why would I do that now of all times? You know, only sporty people are exposed to a permanent risk of injury. So I’m perfectly safe.”

Her smile returned, but only for a few seconds. A blue sports car shot into the salvage yard and stopped in a cloud of dust. Instantly, Aunt Mathilda’s face darkened. “Isn’t that that unpleasant boy from the neighbourhood? The son of that Norris! What’s his name? Skinner! What’s he doing here?”

“He wants to talk to us,” Jupiter replied, embarrassed.

“Talk to you? I didn’t think that you liked him.”

“We don’t!” Pete, who had joined them in the meantime, said out a little loud.

“He’ll be gone in a minute, Aunt Mathilda,” Jupe added. “Don’t worry.”

Mathilda Jones gave her nephew a doubtful look and then she disappeared.

Skinny approached The Three Investigators.

“Hi Skinny!” Jupiter said as neutrally as possible.

“Hi,” Bob added.

Pete was silent.

“Hello.”

“We’re really excited about this, Skinny,” Jupiter said. “Especially after last night.”

“It doesn’t really interest me,” Pete growled barely audible.

“Well, last night,” Skinny began hesitantly and looked around uncertainly. “Do we have to talk about this out here?”

“Why?” hissed Pete. “Are you afraid your friends might happen to notice you talking to us? You think they’ll laugh at you then?”

Jupiter gave the Second Investigator a nasty look. If Pete continued like this, Skinny might change his mind and disappear without having said a word.

“Out here is as good a place as any,” Jupiter said. “Go ahead.”

“Well, last night,” Skinny repeated. “That was very stupid of me. You surprised me. I didn’t expect you to get my drift, so I overreacted a bit. But of course you were right—I was the one who called you.”

Pete gasped for breath. Whatever he expected—it wasn’t that! But even Bob and Jupiter could hardly hide their surprise.

“And what was that all about?” Bob asked. “A stupid game?”

“No, no. No game!” Skinny said quickly. “This is serious. It’s very serious.”

“Then why all the stupid secrecy?” Pete wanted to know.

“You’re answering your own question right now, Crenshaw,” Skinny replied irritated. “If I had played with open cards from the beginning, you wouldn’t have listened to me at all. Like now.”

“We are listening to you,” assured Jupiter. “Go on! What’s all this Sphinx business about?”

Skinny cleared his throat. “Where shall I start?”

“In the beginning!” Pete suggested snappily.

“All right. For the past few months, I’ve been working part-time at a big company in Los Angeles, a plastics manufacturer.”

“Hadden Industries,” Jupiter said. “We know.” That wasn’t entirely true, because he’d never heard of Skinny working for Hadden. But he didn’t have to tell him that.

Right away, Skinny got suspicious and asked: “How do you know?”

“Skinny,” sighed Bob. “When you assign someone to investigate something, don’t be surprised if they find out something.”

“What do you know about Hadden?” Skinny asked.

“How about you tell us what you know first?” Bob suggested. “I guess you owe us that.”

Skinny looked at him angrily for a moment, then relaxed, put his head down and nodded. “All right... so I work at Hadden Industries. It’s a pretty high-paying job. However, one day, Mr Hadden caught me doing... well, I... let’s just say I wasn’t acting entirely correctly. And he was going to throw me out and press charges.”

“What did you do? Steal petty cash?” Pete asked.

It was obvious how unpleasant Skinny was about this topic. He wriggled like a worm on a hook under the eyes of The Three Investigators.

“Something like that,” he finally said. “Anyway, Hadden had me by the short hairs and could’ve got me into real trouble. But he made me a deal—either I get in trouble with the cops, or I do a job for him and get paid a lot of money for it.”

“You chose the latter, of course,” Jupiter surmised. “And what is this job?”

“I’m to sail on a ship that leaves in three days—the *Hadden Explorer*.”

“Who would have thought,” mumbled Pete. “So?”

“The *Explorer* needs another cabin boy. That is all. At least, that’s all Hadden told me. But I didn’t believe him. Why would he want me for it? So I did a little snooping around.”

“Skinny, Skinny,” Pete blamed. “I hope you haven’t been caught again.”

“Can you tell your lackey to shut up, Jones?” Skinny suddenly barked. “He’s really getting on my nerves.”

“Watch your mouth, Skinny!” Pete counter-attacked. “If you want our help, don’t try anything.”

“Your help! Hah! You haven’t found out anything yet anyway! Detectives! I should have guessed all those stories about you were nothing but bragging. You’re probably just making all this nonsense up.” He looked at Bob in anger. “And you get your father to print it in the papers.”

“What?” Bob took a step towards Skinny. “Say that again, you—”

“Guys!” cried Jupiter. “Guys! Calm down! How about we just keep it real? So, Skinny, you were snooping around. What did you find out?”

Skinny stared at Bob angrily and for a moment Jupiter thought he would turn on his heels and run away. But then he calmed down and continued.

“The *Explorer* has exactly the same destination as another ship from Hadden Industries that left two weeks ago—the *Montana*. It went to the West Pacific, to Micronesia. Mako, to be exact... Maka...”

“Makatao,” Jupiter interrupted. “I hope this proves that we haven’t been as idle as you just suggested.”

“Makatao, right,” Skinny said irritated. “And when translated, do you know what Makatao means?”

“Island of Death,” Bob said coolly.

“Right. And do you know why?”

“Well, there are all sorts of rumours,” Bob remembered. “Some claim that the name originated—”

“Because no one who has ever been to Makatao has returned alive! And shall I tell you something else? The *Montana*’s gone. Hadden’s been out of contact with the crew for six days. And now he’s sending the *Explorer* after them to save the crew. It’s a suicide mission. He kept all this from me.”

Pete grinned maliciously and rubbed his hands. “I’m beginning to understand your dilemma, Skinny. You got scared about the Island of Death, but you can’t go back because Hadden will report you. And no one returns from Makatao? Excellent! That would solve all our problems!”

To Jupiter’s astonishment, Skinny didn’t explode this time.

“Okay,” he said calmly. “So I’m scared of this job. I don’t want to go to the Island of Death. That’s why I called you last week.”

“What do you mean?” Jupiter asked.

“In the documents in which I found the information about the *Montana* and the *Explorer*, a name appeared again and again... Sphinx. It seems to be a group of people and they have something to do with this expedition, but I couldn’t find out more. But there is a secret about this Island of Death and I am sure that Sphinx is the key. So I had to find someone who could solve this mystery.” Skinny paused.

“And then you came to us,” Bob uttered the sentence hanging in the air. Skinny nodded.

“I don’t believe it!” cried Pete, half indignant, half amused. “You’ve never taken us seriously as detectives before! And now you suddenly want our help to solve the Sphinx puzzle?”

“You guys are into this mysterious stuff,” Skinny defended himself and tried to sound contemptuous. He didn’t succeed very well. “Everyone in Rocky Beach knows that. Does anyone want a stupid puzzle solved? Ask ‘The Three Instigators’, they’ll take it up.”

“Only this puzzle is not stupid, on the contrary,” Jupiter noted and decided to speak the unvarnished truth. “It scares you so much that you turn to your worst enemies, because they may be the only ones left who can help you.”

“So? Can you?” Skinny hated the way Jupiter held the mirror up to him. But he was in a much weaker position and could only grit his teeth.

“I’m not quite sure,” replied the First Investigator. “We have tried to find out who or what is behind Sphinx... but I don’t think this is the way to solve the mystery.”

Now Jupiter told him what they had learned. He watched Skinny very closely. He still didn’t know whether he could trust him. The situation was more than strange. Their old arch enemy was facing them and Jupiter confided the results of their investigation to him. If someone had told him this scenario a week ago, Jupiter would have just laughed out loud. Skinny Norris of all people! It was absurd.

In any case, caution was required. It was still possible that Skinny wanted to frame them. Jupiter was not clear in which way and for what purpose, so he had to maintain a certain level of suspicion. But no matter how closely he watched Skinny, none of his movements suggested that he was playing a double game.

“So, we know what Sphinx is all about and how Hadden is involved, but exactly what kind of secret is hidden on Makatao is still unclear. In any case, you’re not the only one who feels uneasy at the thought of going to the Island of Death, Skinny. Juan, who is with Sphinx, also suspects that Hadden is planning something completely different from what he claims. I fear, however, there is only one way to solve this mystery.”

“And what is it, wise guy?”

“You have to get on board the *Explorer* and go with it.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Then you’ll get trouble from Hadden.”

“I know that, too. But don’t you think this thing stinks? There may be a crime behind it! We can’t let the *Explorer* go.”

“We?” echo Pete. “You just want to save your own skin—as if you care about law and order! And you want us to play along? I’m not playing! Why should I help you? Get your own head out of the noose.”

“Typical!” growled Skinny. “The noble Three Investigators, always selfless and helpful. ‘We Investigate Anything’! Don’t make me laugh! But when it really comes down to it, you chicken out. And why? Because you don’t like your client!”

“For good reason!” Pete snapped.

“Do you always do this? Do you always divide people into two groups and help only those you like? And you don’t care about the rest? Even if you know that you are putting them in great danger? You make it so easy for yourselves!”

“Don’t exaggerate, Skinny,” Bob tried to mediate. “Putting yourself into great danger is just your own guess. Maybe it’s harmless.”

“You don’t believe that yourself!” Skinny cried.

“And even if you did, you put yourself in danger,” Pete said. “Not us.”

“If anything happens to me, you’ll be held accountable for failure to help,” Skinny claimed.

Pete laughed. “Now you don’t really believe that, do you? You can help yourself without any problems. Just don’t go on the expedition!”

“And Hadden?” Skinny asked.

“He’ll have his reasons for firing you or even pressing charges. That’s your own stupidity. You know what, Skinny? You’re a pathetic coward! You want us to clean up the mess you made for yourself? I’m not taking any!” Demonstrating, Pete turned and walked away.

“Hey, Pete!” cried Jupiter appeasingly. “Stay here! We haven’t finished talking.”

“For me there is nothing more to talk about,” Pete said back over his shoulder without turning around. Then he disappeared behind a pile of junk.

9. Delayed Revenge

“So you won’t help me...” Skinny grumbled.

Jupiter wondered. “Pete is right. It’s not our job to save you from the consequences of your own actions.” He took a break. “But you are also right. Maybe there really is a crime behind all this. That’s why we’re going to keep investigating. But I have two conditions. One—in the future, you play with open cards and tell us everything about the case immediately. Two—when this is over, whatever that means, you face your punishment.”

Skinny glared at him angrily. “You think you can call the shots here, eh Jones?”

“What are you talking about, Skinny?” Jupiter replied, annoyed.

“You’re a self-righteous fatso! You mean you can set the terms for me? I won’t have it!”

“It’s very simple, Skinny,” said Jupiter calmly. “I can set the terms for you! The thing is—if it’s about justice, then we’ll help you, but in the end everyone will have to answer for their mistakes. Or if it’s about saving your head... then you can do that yourself, but without us.”

“This is blackmail,” Skinny hissed.

“Call it what you want. It all boils down to the same thing. You have to decide what you want.”

Skinny stared at him, stared at Bob, stared at Headquarters, across the salvage yard, on the ground and kept silent. At some point, Jupiter wondered if he would say anything at all.

But then came a short nod. “Okay. But the deal only applies if you find out something. If I end up doing all the work, the deal collapses.”

Jupiter just nodded.

Skinny turned around without another word and headed for his car when Jupiter remembered something else. “Hey, Skinny... Where did you actually get a key to Barbara Jefferson’s house?”

Skinny stopped. “How do you know about that?”

“When you assign someone to investigate something, don’t be surprised if...” Bob began.

“... He'll find out something,” Skinny finished Bob's sentence and hissed: “Smart ass!”

“So, Skinny?” Jupiter asked. “Is that what Hadden caught you doing? Did you steal his employees' keys?”

“Nonsense! It's a private matter, okay?”

Jupiter frowned. “The deal is that you tell us everything you know, Skinny! Have you already—”

“Barbara is my friend!” hissed Skinny. “Don't you ever follow me again.”

“His girlfriend?” Pete sneered when Skinny had disappeared and Bob and Jupiter had told him everything. “I don't believe it. Skinny is fooling around with us! Why can't you see that?”

They were back together at Headquarters. Pete ran up and down like a trapped predator despite the oppressive tightness inside the trailer.

“He wouldn't have any motive at all,” Bob disagreed.

“Maybe it is his idea of a delayed revenge on us?” Pete interjected. “For the countless times, we were faster and better than him? Somehow, I think he wants revenge.”

“I can understand your suspicions, Pete,” Jupiter thought. “But this story is too confusing for Skinny to have made it up. There's more to it than that. And that's why we must continue. It's not about doing Skinny a favour, but about solving the mystery. Nothing else interests me.”

“And what I'm objecting to is once again completely unimportant,” Pete remarked.

Jupiter sighed heavily. “Don't pretend you don't care about this case, Pete. That's not true.”

“Right. I care about the case. And as far as I'm concerned, we can move on,” Pete said. “But without Skinny!”

“But Skinny is an important informant for us,” Bob said. “Right now, he is the most important one. He gets right up to Hadden and his secretary.”

Bob thought about it for a moment and started to laugh. “How old did you say Barbara was, Juve?”

“I guess in the mid-twenties. At least.”

“Almost five to six years older than Skinny!” Bob quipped. “I wonder if she's really his girlfriend.”

“Of course not!” cried Pete. “That’s what I’ve been talking about. He’s lying to us!”

“That could be found out,” said Jupiter. “But I do not see the relevance. Whether Skinny stole the keys to her house or got them from her is not important. What is certain is that he wants exactly the same thing as we do—to find out what this expedition is all about and what Makatao and the lost *Hadden Montana* are all about. As incredible as it sounds, this is the first time Skinny Norris has been on our side.” Jupiter looked sharply at the Second Investigator.

But Pete had given up. “All right, all right,” he muttered. “How do we proceed?”

“In three days, the *Hadden Explorer* will set sail. By then, we must find out what’s going on. I think the ship’s cargo will be very revealing. Bob, why don’t you ask Jelena if she has any ideas. She’s done a lot of enquiries in that direction.”

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise. “May I enter this in my golden quote book? You’re asking me to ask Jelena?”

“This is the latest trend, Bob,” Pete said. “Working with old enemies.”

The ringing of the phone interrupted the conversation. Jupiter was grateful for this.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Good evening, Jupiter, this is Worthington.”

“Worthington!” cried Jupiter in surprise. “What... what can I do for you?” Jupiter quickly switched on the loudspeaker.

“I’m a little worried,” the chauffeur replied hesitantly. “And I was hoping that you could take this feeling away from me.”

“Did something happen?”

“Yes. Don’t take this the wrong way, but since our encounter the day before yesterday I’ve been paying more attention to whether you’re tailing me again.”

“I... uh, well, how shall I put it...”

“Never mind, Jupiter. I noticed.”

“Uh, really?”

“But not only that.”

“What else?”

“I’ve had a total of three rides with Mr Hadden in the last two days. Each time, I noticed a car following me.”

Jupiter frowned. “It wasn’t a blue sports car by any chance?”

“No. And that’s the really weird thing about it. It was a different vehicle every time,” Worthington said. “And as far as I could tell, there was a different driver every time—but not someone I know.”

“This is... weird.”

“But that’s not all. I also have the feeling that I’m being followed,” Worthington continued. “On my other trips, on the way home, shopping... I’m never one hundred percent sure, but it seems to me that for the last few days, there have been increasingly suspicious-looking people hanging around me. Men sitting on a park bench reading the newspaper in dark sunglasses. Joggers who have crossed my path more than once. Strangers that I have met again and again in the corridor for days, although I have never seen them before.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. That’s the problem, Jupiter. I’m not sure. That’s why I called you. Do you have an explanation? Could it have something to do with the case you are investigating? The one which you suspected Mr Hadden? Otherwise, it’s possible that this is all pure coincidence.”

“I... I don’t know, Worthington. Frankly, I’m stumped.”

Worthington was silent for a moment. “I had hoped your answer would be different, Jupiter. I’m getting... a little nervous. To be perfectly frank... I’m getting scared.”

“I’m really not comfortable with this. At first the case sounded quite exciting. But now...” Bob looked at Jelena with a serious look. “In Worthington’s words, I’m getting scared.”

The two had arranged to meet for breakfast the next morning. They sat on the balcony in the warm morning sun and looked out over the large garden with the oak grove.

Jelena Charkova lived in a mansion on a narrow mountain road just outside Rocky Beach. Her father was a professor at the Santa Monica Conservatory of Music and Jelena had inherited his musical talent—she played the violin excellently. Otherwise, she would be busy with one of her science hobbies or assisting The Three Investigators with their investigations.

Jelena seemed troubled after listening to Bob’s story. “Can you make any sense out of it? What has Worthington got to do with this, I mean?”

Bob raised his eyebrows. “The usual... Jupiter needs more clues to develop a theory. Pete sees huge conspiracies everywhere and wants to get

out immediately.”

“And you?” Jelena asked.

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Jelena looked at him piercingly. Her look was clear—she would not let him go until he had told her what was going on inside him.

Bob sighed. “I can’t explain it all except to myself. It’s bigger than we thought. There are more people interested in Sphinx, Hadden and his expedition. And they’re so professional, they’re even watching Hadden’s chauffeur.”

“So it’s a conspiracy after all,” Jelena said. Was that meant as a mockery? Bob wasn’t sure.

“No. Or yes. A little,” Bob said. “But not to the extent that Pete imagines with the FBI and CIA and all. I’m sure the government has nothing to do with it.”

“Maybe it’s a secret society like Sphinx. Or rich entrepreneurs, who spy on Hadden because they want the same thing as he does—something that is on this island. Only what could it be?”

“I’ve already tried to find out more about Makatao. But apart from rumours of the ruins of an ancient Micronesian people, I haven’t found anything else.”

“Except for indications that someone was trying to cover up something,” Jelena reminded him.

“That was just my first impression. I could have been wrong.”

“What if you’re right? What if we’re really dealing with an enemy powerful enough to forge documents and pull strings from the background undetected?”

Bob involuntarily shivered... but then he shook his head vigorously. “Oh, no. I can’t imagine who that could be.”

He looked at Jelena. She didn’t seem convinced. No, there was more. She looked worried. Almost afraid.

“What’s wrong?” Bob asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Come on, Jelena, something’s wrong.”

She wrestled with herself for a moment. “It probably doesn’t mean anything.”

“What doesn’t mean anything?” Bob asked.

“I’m sure it’s not important.”

“Come on! What is it?” Now Bob was the one who was relentlessly probing her.

“Yesterday, after violin lessons. I noticed a man waiting for someone outside the music school,” Jelena said and then paused.

“So?” Bob followed up when Jelena didn’t speak. “What do you mean, you noticed him?”

A mischievous grin crept across her face. “Well, he was quite handsome. A bit like Sean Connery in his younger days.”

“Indeed. And what is so remarkable about that?”

“That I met him again... an hour later. I was just riding through the garden to sit in the last patch of evening sun when I saw him by the road. He looked over at our house. And he looked right at me.”

“Oh, oh,” Pete said. A steep worry line appeared on his forehead. “First Worthington, now Jelena. And I’m feeling very queasy.” He went to the small window of Headquarters and peeped through a crack in the curtain as if he expected to see a dozen figures watching the trailer at the salvage yard. “I wonder if we’re being tailed too.”

“No,” Jupiter said calmly.

“How can you be so sure?” Pete asked.

“If there is a connection between the Worthington case and the Jelena case—and I think we can assume that there is—it makes no sense for us to be observed.”

“Why not?” Bob asked.

“Because we’ve been keeping a low profile, unlike Worthington and Jelena.”

“You speak in riddles, Jupe,” Pete quipped.

“It’s very simple, Pete. We have nothing to do with this whole thing. The only ones involved are Hadden and the members of Sphinx—so they’re being shadowed. They and the people around them. That includes Worthington.”

“And what about Jelena?”

“Jelena has done some enquiries on the *Explorer* and the *Montana*. I think she scared the great unknown man with it. And now he wants to know who is suddenly interested in the two ships. We can’t have got in his way yet, since our enquiries has been limited to publicly available sources of information.”

Bob thought of something. "Jelena wants to get back on the phone today to find out what kind of cargo the *Hadden Explorer* will be carrying. If your theory is correct, Jupe, it will probably attract even more attention. Shouldn't we better warn her?"

"What for? If she's already being watched..."

"How can you be so calm about all this, Jupe?" cried Pete in outrage. "You make it all sound like a relaxed shopping trip. Well, I'm really losing it. I'm really scared when I think about this stalker."

"It's scary," Jupiter admitted. "But our only chance to find out more about the case is from the *Explorer*. And of course Skinny Norris. I wonder if he'll get back to us. We'll just have to wait and see."

Bob spent the evening at home alone. His parents were out. Normally he would have gone over to the salvage yard, but Jupiter had gone out to dinner with his uncle and aunt and Pete had arranged to meet Jeffrey.

Bob was restless. He couldn't get the observations of Worthington and Jelena out of his head. He caught himself walking back and forth to his bedroom window and peering out. Was there a figure in the street? Yes, there was something moving. Bob squinted his eyes together—and breathed a sigh of relief. It was just the neighbour walking his dog.

"Don't drive yourself crazy, Bob Andrews," he admonished himself. "Totally unnecessary. And ineffective, as Jupe would say."

The telephone tore him from his gloomy thoughts. It was Jelena.

"Hi. I'm glad you called. I think a little chatting is good for me."

"Oh, yeah?" Something was wrong. The sound of Jelena's voice was... different.

"What's wrong?" Bob asked.

"I have proof now."

"For what?"

"That I was not mistaken," Jelena said. "I spoke on the phone today. A lot. But I couldn't find out for the life of me what the *Hadden Explorer* will transport when it leaves the day after tomorrow. Most of the people I spoke to were surprised themselves that they had no information in their records. It was very mysterious."

"So what?"

Jelena swallowed. Her voice sounded husky as she continued: "I just got a call. My father answered and then called me to the phone."

"Who was it?"

“I don’t know. A man. He didn’t say his name. Actually, he sounded pretty creepy, more like he just wheezed.”

“And what did he... wheeze?”

““The *Explorer* is none of your business. If you want to live, stay out of it.””

10. Funny Business

Bob swallowed. "Oh, gosh."

"I'm a little scared, Bob."

"So am I. Listen, Jelena," Bob said. "You get out. It's getting too risky."

"And because I'm a poor, handicapped girl, I'm supposed to..."

"No, Jelena. It's because it's getting too risky!" Bob cried.

"But you're not getting out, am I right?"

"We haven't been threatened yet," Bob reasoned. "We have no idea what's behind this and how dangerous these people really are!"

"Do you think I should call the police?" Jelena asked.

Bob was thinking. "I don't know. You'll have to decide."

"Hmm. I wouldn't feel so helpless if I did. On the other hand, what can I tell the police? That I got an ugly phone call. But I swear to you, the next time I see a guy lurking outside our house, I'm gonna call the cops."

"All right. But until then, you don't do anything, okay?" Bob said. "We'll be fine on our own for now."

"All right," Jelena said. "But let me know as soon as there are any news!"

"Sure."

"Right away, you hear?"

"Yes, yes, all right."

"Thanks, Bob. Good night."

"Good night." Bob had just hung up and the phone rang again.

"Yeah?"

"Andrews?"

"Yes?"

"This is Skinner."

"Oh. Uh... Hi," Bob stammered. He did not expect Skinny to call him at home. It was still absurd that they were now something like allies.

"I need your help."

"Excuse me?"

“I need you to meet me in Santa Monica in half an hour,” Skinny said. “Can you make it?”

“Uh... what’s this about?” Bob asked.

“Hadden just contacted me. He wants to see me immediately,” Skinny said. “He said it is regarding the expedition and it is urgent—in half an hour at the Santa Monica Industrial Park.”

“So what?”

“I have a bad feeling about this. Hadden knows that I would like to get out of this. I’m afraid he’s going to... well, he’ll...”

“Trying to convince you by force?” Bob gave him a hint. “Do you think he’s capable of that?”

“Hadden is unpredictable. I wouldn’t put anything past him,” Skinny continued. “I don’t want to go there alone. I already tried calling the fat guy... I mean Jones and Crenshaw, but nobody picked up the phone. You’re the only one left.”

“You want me to go with you? Hadden’s gonna be pretty surprised, don’t you think?”

“You’re not supposed to show up there with me. Just be around. You know, in case something happens.” It was clear how uncomfortable this situation was for Skinny.

Bob pondered for a while. What if Pete was right? What if Skinny was pulling some funny business? On the other hand, he couldn’t imagine how or why he should do that. And now he had the unique opportunity to learn more about the destination of the expedition. If he did not take it, Jupiter would kill him tomorrow, that much was certain.

“All right, I’m coming.”

Like every city, the picturesque Santa Monica also had its dark sides. The industrial area at night was without doubt one of them. Where during the day it might have been dusty, loud and ugly, at night it was completely dead—downright ghostly, quiet and deserted. Not even a cat roamed through the darkness, no cricket chirped, there was no dog barking and certainly no human voices. One factory bordered the next and trucks lay like sleeping monsters in the shadows of the huge buildings.

The only thing that broke through the complete silence was the banging of the car door as Bob got out of his Beetle. It seemed deafeningly loud.

Bob looked around. There were hardly any street lights. The world around him was a world of shadows. To be on the safe side, he took another look at the address Skinny had given. Yes, he was right here. Now he only had to find Hall 3. That is where the meeting would take place.

Bob crept between the dark buildings and wondered why Hadden had chosen such a place. Only two answers came to his mind—either there was something in Hall 3 that he had to show or hand over to Skinny; or Hall 3 was a completely arbitrary meeting place and Hadden had simply chosen the most secluded place on the entire west coast of California to meet his... Bob scared the thought away.

He looked at his watch—two minutes late. The drive to Santa Monica had taken longer than expected. But he hadn't seen any other cars on the road. So there was plenty of time to find a safe place to hide.

Hall 3 looked exactly like Halls 1 and 2. Behind a large steel container, he had a good overview without being seen himself. Bob waited. Nothing moved, not even after five minutes. Slowly he became nervous. Maybe he was late after all... Or had Skinny tricked him in a way he didn't understand until now?

He would have liked to run up and down to fight his restlessness, but he had to stay under cover.

Suddenly, he heard a noise behind him! He turned around. A tall, dark figure had appeared from nowhere behind his back! It struck out! Bob raised his arm.

A heavy, hard object hit his wrist. A searing pain flashed through him. Bob wanted to scream, but something crashed on his head. Bizarre patterns exploded before his eyes. Suddenly, everything went dark.

The next afternoon Jupiter was sitting at his desk at Headquarters, staring at the computer screen. Three question marks—one white, one blue, one green—slowly wandered across the monitor. It was his self-programmed screen saver. They are symbols for unanswered questions, unsolved puzzles and secrets of all kinds. There were plenty of them in this case. Nevertheless, the screen saver had no answers.

The door was ripped open. Jupiter did not have to turn around to know who it was. There was only one person who made so much noise every time he entered Headquarters. It was as if he had too much energy and didn't know where to put it.

“Hi, Jupe!” cried Pete. “What's new?”

“Something you won’t like,” he proclaimed.

“Really?” Pete said. “I don’t like the way you say that.”

“We’re about to have a visitor. He—”

“Let me guess,” Pete interrupted. “He is Skinny Norris.”

“Exactly.”

“Excellent,” Pete moaned, rolling his eyes. “So I should have come two hours later. Speaking of coming late, where’s Bob, anyway? Wasn’t he supposed to be here by now?”

Jupiter nodded. “I also wonder where he is. Skinny will show up here any minute. He called earlier and said he had important information for us and needed to meet urgently.”

“Well, I’m curious about that,” hummed Pete and went to ‘See-All’—the periscope constructed from stove pipes and mirrors, with which they could see outside through the roof of the trailer. “I’d like it if we were all here when Skinny has something to tell us... Uh-huh... Too late. Here comes Skinny.”

The Second Investigator did not even try to hide his displeasure. “I’m telling you—that guy won’t set foot in Headquarters!”

“All right, all right, we’ll meet him outside!” Jupe said.

They went out to the salvage yard. Dust danced in the sun. Some customers wandered among the displays and scrap heaps. Skinny didn’t stroll. He walked straight towards them. He seemed nervous and irritated, looking from one to the other.

“Hi Skinny,” Jupiter said as politely as possible.

“What’s up?” asked Pete curtly.

“Andrews is not here?”

“If you mean Bob, no,” Jupe replied. “Does it matter?”

“I... no, I...” Skinny stammered.

“Get to the point, Skinny!” Pete demanded angrily. There was nothing he could do. Skinny’s presence alone made him aggressive.

“I met with Hadden yesterday. The *Explorer*... It is leaving tomorrow at one o’clock. So if we want to find out something, we have to do it as soon as possible.”

“We?” cried Pete. “How about you do something for a change? Where do you get off giving us orders anyway?”

“I’m not doing that. Don’t get all worked up, Crenshaw!” Skinny spat back. “But I made a deal with you all the day before yesterday. I’m just doing what we agreed. I’ll tell you everything I know, and in exchange,

you'll help me. So, how about we take a look around the *Explorer* tonight?"

"Tonight?" Pete wondered.

"Else when?"

"You're just gonna march up to the ship like that?" Pete asked.

"You got a better idea?"

"Here we go! You want to boss us around?" Pete snapped. "Look, Skinny, we don't have to—"

"Slowly, slowly!" Jupiter interrupted the battle of words. "We should discuss this calmly. And definitely wait for Bob to come."

"Who knows when that will be," grumbled Pete.

"Have you spoken to him today?" Skinny asked.

"No, but yesterday he said he'd show up here today," Jupiter replied.

"Maybe something came up," Skinny suggested.

"Then he would have called," Jupiter said.

"Maybe he didn't have the time."

Jupiter startled. What was Skinny talking about?

"Wait!" Pete said. "Here he comes!"

Bob just rode his bike through the gate into the salvage yard. He was slower than usual. And shakier. Then Jupiter saw the reason for it—Bob's right hand was in a white bandage.

"What happened to you?" Jupiter asked anxiously.

"Oh!" Bob grumpy waved it away. "I fell down the stairs last night. Must have been too tired. Only I could be that stupid. I didn't think it was bad, but today my wrist got thicker and thicker. I just went to the doctor, and that's why I'm late. It's just a sprain."

"What a bummer," Pete remarked.

"Where were you last night, Skinny?" Bob asked irritably. "I..."

"Oh... oh, yeah," Skinny interrupted. "Hadden called a second time and suggested a different venue. Not the industrial park, but the harbour. I was going to let you know, but you'd already left. I'm sorry."

"What?" Pete spoke up. "Did I miss something here? Meet at the harbour? Last night? Would you be so kind as to tell us about it?"

Bob told his friends in short words what had happened the night before. "I was crouching around that stupid Hall 3 for almost an hour. While waiting, I even fell asleep, I think. And then I went home. And because I was so tired, I immediately put myself out of action on the stairs. Really great."

“And you didn’t see anyone?” Skinny asked.

Jupiter watched Bob’s face darken. No wonder—thanks to Skinny, Bob had sprained his hand, he was tired and now he had to answer stupid questions from stupid people.

“Whom did you expect to be there? You said the meeting was held elsewhere,” Bob said, annoyed. “But I see you’re doing great, Skinny. Hadden didn’t beat you up, kidnap you, kill you or anything. So you didn’t have to worry. What did he want from you?”

“He told me to be on board the *Explorer* at one o’clock sharp tomorrow. We will then sail. Hopefully without me.”

“We are currently discussing whether we should take a look around on the *Explorer* tonight,” Jupiter informed Bob. “The last chance. So, Skinny, what’s your plan?”

“Plan?” Skinny said contemptuously. “Don’t get intellectual again, Jones. You don’t need a plan for this action. We’ll go to the harbour tonight, climb on the ship, look around and leave.”

“Since when do you have anything to say?” hissed Pete.

“What is this?” Skinny got annoyed. “You yap on and on about the simplest things. You think you’re so smart just because you spend more time talking than doing things.”

“And you’re smarter because you do first and think later, or what?” Pete snapped back.

“Guys!” Jupiter remembered. “This discussion is indeed superfluous. We’ll do it like Skinny suggested.”

Pete gasped for breath. “What? Are you two in cahoots now?”

“Nobody is in cahoots. But Skinny made a reasonable suggestion,” Juve said. “We’ll do that way.”

Skinny nodded to Jupiter. “The *Explorer* is in the harbour of Santa Monica. It is a small freighter. Hadden showed it to me yesterday, Pier 13. Meet me there at midnight.”

And with that, the big, lanky kid with the pale skin turned and walked out of the salvage yard.

11. The Ghost Ship

It was quarter past eleven—usually bedtime. It didn't seem right to go to bed so early during the vacation. Besides, Jelena wasn't a bit tired.

But at the same time, she was terribly listless. Practise the violin? She had already done so for two hours today. Read? Nothing appealed to her at the moment. Watch TV? It was just junk anyway.

Call someone? The parents of their friends would thank her nicely if the phone rang at this time of the day. And her father was at a concert and wanted to meet up with colleagues afterwards. That could take a while.

She rode aimlessly through the big house—into her bedroom, into the kitchen to the refrigerator, into the big hall where the grand piano was. Feeling frustrated, she couldn't get that call from yesterday out of her head. She had tried to sound as cool as she could opposite Bob, but the truth was that, she was becoming more and more panicky.

She felt that she was being watched—on the street, at school, at home, all the time—like there were cameras hidden everywhere... Or like some stranger was sneaking through the house—with someone in the background pulling the strings.

What would she do if she met him again? Was she brave enough to face him? Or would she flee in fear? She feared that this moment would soon come.

Jelena moved back into her bedroom and opened the window. She left the light on. This was something she did often—just sitting at the window, enjoying the cool night air and watching the garden. The garden at night was exciting—almost always something was rushing somewhere, like mice scurrying through the grass. Or raccoons in leaves. Sometimes she saw owls on the hunt or the shining eyes of a cat from the neighbourhood.

Today she saw something else. A small red dot lit up along the road outside her house. It was the glowing tip of a cigarette. Nothing out of the ordinary as it was just outside the iron fence. Perhaps that person was waiting for someone.

But Jelena noted that he was there for a long time, pacing around. Perhaps that man was watching her. Determined, she sat at the window by

the front door, staring half furiously, half anxiously at that man. She had her binoculars with her. But even with that, she could only see the glowing cigarette in the dark. Sooner or later, he could come close to the street lamp.

Jelena continued watching and finally, the man did come out into the light and looked towards her house. Her binoculars were really good. She saw him clearly—it was the guy she had noticed before the music school—Sean Connery!

Her heart was beating up to her neck. Now she was sure that he was watching her. Who was he? Why was he stalking her? She was so determined not to be afraid. She had gone through this situation a thousand times—how would she courageously approach the stranger and confront him. But now is not the time.

In a hurry, she reached to the wheels of her wheelchair and began to move to the phone! She dialled the police number.

“Yes? Hello? Jelena Charkova here. I need help. Someone is just outside my garden watching me. He’s been there for more than half an hour...”

Jelena went back to the window to continue watching that man to wait for the police. She waited and waited. Where were the cops?

Finally, a car approached the gate. It stopped. Doors slammed. She hoped that the cops weren’t too stupid to let that guy get away!

Two police officers came out and confronted that man. Surprisingly, there was no scuffle, instead he followed the two officers to the police car.

Jelena lifted the binoculars to her eyes. She didn’t want to miss a moment of the action! They talked to each other, first loud and angry, then suddenly quiet and calm. Jelena couldn’t hear anything as they were too far away. But through the binoculars, Jelena saw every movement.

Then she saw it! In shock, she almost dropped the binoculars. My goodness! She couldn’t believe her eyes!

Shortly afterwards, one of the police officers rang the doorbell. Immediately Jelena opened the garden gate using the electrical switch at the door. One policeman approached the house and spoke briefly with Jelena, but she was not really interested. Just as soon as the police left, she rushed to the phone and dialled the number of Headquarters. It rang.

“Answer it! Answer it.” No one picked up. Damn! Nobody was there! Bob had told her what the three of them were up to that night. They were going to check out the *Explorer*! It was a huge mistake!

Jupiter, Pete and Bob could not be allowed to enter that ship under any circumstances!

Bob yawned. Pete looked defiantly out of the window. The Three Investigators were on the way to the harbour in Bob's Beetle.

Jupiter rolled his eyes. "You're great detectives, really. Bob is falling asleep—"

"I had a lousy night, okay?" Bob protested. "And Pete would like to beam away."

"Does that surprise you?" Pete said. "This afternoon I was under the impression that Skinny Norris was our first investigator. He snaps his fingers and we have to jump."

"This is nonsense!" Jupiter defended himself. "And I've already explained this to you a thousand times. We probably would have thought of going to the harbour tonight ourselves. Without Skinny's help, we wouldn't even have known where the *Hadden Explorer* is."

"Do you understand, Jupe?" Pete said. "We don't need Skinny's help. Nobody needs Skinny's help. Nobody needs Skinny! I'm just sick of us working for him."

Jupiter was tired of it. "Okay. I get it. You've said it often enough. Can we just do this, please?"

They were silent for the rest of the journey. At first, because everyone was angry at each other, but the closer they got to Santa Monica, the more the feeling was replaced by inner tensions—the famous tingling sensation. Jupiter had often felt it, especially with the excitement of a night out.

To Bob and Pete, Jupiter always tried to appear as cool as possible, but in fact he was as nervous as they were. As the leader, however, he had to radiate calmness and composure to prevent the other two from going completely nuts. If Bob and Pete had known how many times Jupiter had claimed to be completely sure of himself, although the exact opposite was true, they would probably have killed him on the spot.

The port of Santa Monica was by far not as big as the one in Los Angeles, but it was enough to get lost. Even as Bob drove past the first large buildings and they were desperately looking for signs, Jupiter did not have a good feeling. He was right—after ten minutes, they were hopelessly lost between all the warehouses and shipyards. They had hit dead ends and one-way streets and had to turn back more than once, as red and white striped barriers suddenly blocked their way.

It was almost quarter past midnight when they finally reached Pier 13. Bob parked his car a sufficient distance away and they got out.

A concrete walkway about two hundred metres long, which would have accommodated two vans side by side, protruded into the sea. Ships were moored to the left and right—small freighters mostly, but here and there the freshly painted hull of a private pleasure boat flashed in the moonlight. From a distance, a constant crashing, rumbling and whirring from the industrial harbour came over to them.

Cautiously, they sneaked along the pier. They hardly saw any activities at first. Very soon, about a hundred metres in they saw some lights. A few people were busy walking back and forth between a truck and a ship. The Three Investigators could only recognize the people because the ship's lights were directed at the truck, and they avoided getting closer.

"There's almost no cover," Bob whispered. "How are we gonna get past those people up ahead?"

"Hey, wait a minute! Someone's coming towards us!" hissed Pete and pointed ahead. A figure had come out of a shadow. Long and thin. He was wearing a black hooded shirt. "If it isn't Skinny."

Skinny Norris seemed angry. "What took you guys so long? You are very late!"

"It was not very easy finding the way here," Bob said. "What are those people over there?"

"The crew of the *Explorer*. They're bringing on board a couple of crates right now."

"What kind of crates?" Jupiter asked.

"You think I have X-ray vision? We should go take a look," Skinny replied. "We'll have to get on board somehow."

"We'll wait until the people are gone," Bob suggested.

Skinny shook his head. "Doesn't look like they'll be done soon. I guess they have some kind of meeting for tomorrow. Anyway, they're always chatting, running up the gangplank, running back down again and so on."

"You're funny!" hissed Pete. "Then how are we supposed to get on board?"

"I have an idea. Come with me," Skinny hurried back, scurrying from shadow to shadow, quick as a weasel. The Three Investigators had trouble

following him. Finally, they were as close to the *Explorer* as possible without being seen.

The ship was about thirty metres long. It looked new—new and powerful. The steel hull shone dark blue and the lettering on the sleek bow glowed in the spotlight.

And now The Three Investigators also recognized the people who were busily running back and forth. At least two of them.

“Maria Svenson,” Bob whispered. “And the dark guy next to her is Juan.”

“Here comes two more,” remarked Jupiter. “That must be Olin and Schwartz. These four make up the crew of the ship. Together with you, Skinny. And there’s another man at the driver’s seat of the truck. So, Skinny, what’s your idea?”

“Very simple. I’ll walk up to the four over there and distract them. Meanwhile, one of you climb over that rope over there on board.” He pointed to one of the ropes with which the *Explorer* was moored.

“You distract them? How are you gonna do that?”

“Well, I’ll engage them in a conversation. After all, I am part of their team,” Skinny said. “They know Hadden sent me to go with them. I’ll just say that I want to take a look around before we leave tomorrow. They won’t suspect a thing.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Sounds good. So let’s get it over with. Pete, are you ready?”

The Second Investigator stared at him in horror. “Me? Why me?”

“Well, someone has to climb aboard,” Juve explained. “And it’s common knowledge that I can’t do that. After a metre, I’ll be hanging on this rope like a wet sack, unable to move forward or backward.”

“Oh! And so I must put my life in danger? What about Bob?” Pete asked, annoyed.

Instead of answering, Bob held up his bandaged hand.

“Oh, no,” Pete moaned. Desperately searching for a way out, but there was none. For seconds, he struggled with his fate.

“It will be completely safe,” assured Jupiter. “You just check what’s in the crates and then come back down.”

“What if I get caught?”

“You won’t,” Skinny promised. “I’ll keep the four of them talking long enough. You have at least ten minutes.”

“What if there are other people below deck?”

“There’s no one left. I’ve been standing here for half an hour watching the ship, remember? It’s just the four of them. By the way, some of the crates have been taken below deck, you’ll have to do some searching.”

Pete sighed. “All right. Let’s get this over with.”

Skinny just nodded, pulled the hood of his shirt over his head and left the cover.

“Why is he wearing the hood?” Bob wondered.

“I don’t know.” Jupiter watched as Skinny approached the four people who were all standing on the pier right now. At first, they seemed surprised, almost alarmed, but then they relaxed. Skinny stood in such a way that the others turned their backs on The Three Investigators. They were talking, but not a word could be heard. “Let’s go, Pete! Good luck!”

The Second Investigator nodded. “If anything goes wrong, I promise you, Skinny will get a punch in the nose.”

“You’ll be fine!” Bob said encouragingly.

Pete threw a last, securing glance at the crew, then he scurried silently towards the *Explorer*. It was fascinating how he climbed up the mooring rope to the deck of the ship seemingly without any problems, as if he had never done anything else in his life. It took him only a few seconds before he jumped onto the steel deck. Maybe even Jupiter would have managed that, Pete thought to himself as he disappeared into the darkness.

Pete looked around. A number of wooden boxes stood over there behind the bridge. All the better, as there, he could not be seen from the pier. He crept over. There were four wooden crates—all well-nailed but without labels.

“Oh, great. Why didn’t I bring my crowbar? That’s what I should always carry!” But what did Skinny say? Something was stowed below deck.

Pete discovered a small white steel door, which was opened. Behind it was a staircase leading down. The light was on, but there was no sound. He had to trust that Skinny was right and that there was really nobody on board. Nevertheless, he didn’t want to take the chance and leave the *Explorer* just yet. So he thought: “Get down, have a look around and then leave!”

The Second Investigator climbed down the narrow staircase and stood in a narrow corridor from which half a dozen doors branched off on both sides. It was eerie, like on a ghost ship, as if the crew had vanished into thin air.

12. Foul Play

“Great, Pete,” Bob whispered. “He’s so fast that the diversion probably wouldn’t have been necessary. Let’s hope the way back works out just as well.”

“What’s going to happen now?” Jupiter wondered.

“What?” Bob asked.

“Look!” Jupiter pointed to Skinny Norris who waved at the crew—and walked up the gangplank aboard the *Explorer*.

“What’s he doing?” Bob cried. “He promised to give Pete ten minutes.”

“Something must have come up,” Jupiter was convinced. “Maybe they got rid of him because they still have so much to do. Now he should go and see his cabin or something.”

“Hope this works out,” Bob said.

They kept their eyes on Maria Svenson and the others. They stood around for about two minutes and talked to each other. Then Dr Svenson went to the driver of the truck, who had not left the driver’s seat the whole time. Shortly afterwards, she returned—and went aboard. The other two men followed her, only Juan stopped.

“Damn!” hissed Bob. “Pete has to get off the ship immediately or he’ll be discovered!”

Suddenly a deafening roar broke through the silence and a bright light flashed up and shone straight into faces of Jupiter and Bob!

Pete put his ear to the first cabin. It was silent. There was no keyhole for him to peer through, so he carefully pushed the handle down. It was dark inside the room, but the incoming light made him see a large table and several chairs. Behind them was a small kitchen—the galley. He crept on.

The next room was a tiny cabin, which already contained some travel bags. Then another cabin—a spacious storage room, stuffed with tools and other stuff. Two more cabins to go.

Only behind the last door at the end of the corridor, Pete found what he was looking for. It was a large storeroom. All over the place, there were boxes and cartons. Pete switched on the light and closed the door behind him as a precaution. Then he inspected the load. Some of the boxes were easy to open, but Pete was disappointed—it was food. Dozens of tins and jars, cardboard boxes and dried fruit—just about everything you need for a long journey.

In a large steel chest, he discovered a strange technical equipment that he had never seen before. It looked like an oversized jack that had yet to be assembled. But perhaps it was also something completely different. The other boxes were locked.

Pete let his shoulders droop. So much for his great unveiling. Other than about a quart of cold sweat, the venture had yielded nothing. Time to go!

A noise made him jump. There were footsteps in the corridor! Someone was coming towards the storeroom! In a flash, Pete switched off the light and hid behind a wooden box. Damn Skinny! The ten minutes were not even half over. The idiot had not managed to distract the Sphinx crew long enough!

With a beating heart, Pete listened. The steps had faded away. Could he dare to slip out and disappear? He waited another minute, but the corridor outside the door remained silent.

He was about to leave his hiding place when the door was opened with a jerk. A broad strip of light fell into the storeroom. Pete recognized the tall figure.

“Crenshaw?” the voice said. “Skinner here. You gotta get out of here and fast!” And then he was gone again. The door slowly fell shut.

Pete shot the adrenalin through his body. He’d been here too long. He had to get out of here! He opened the door a crack and peered out. There was no one there. Skinny had probably disappeared up the stairs. Pete immediately left the storeroom and closed the door behind him. As quickly and quietly as possible, he sprinted to the stairs.

He had almost reached it when suddenly a shadow jumped at him from behind and put a hand on his mouth! Pete slipped, gasped for breath, and punched behind him. The hand pressed a stinking cloth ironically in front of his nose. A grey, heavy wall of fog rushed towards Pete’s head, towards his whole body, enveloping him like cotton wool. The bright light became even brighter, then suddenly dark, and his knees just gave way. He didn’t

even have time to wonder anymore. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

Jupiter and Bob were blinded by the headlights of the truck. The driver had them right in his sights. The shock lasted only two seconds, until the man shouted: “Hey, you guys! What are you doing here?”

They had been discovered! “Go, go!” Bob cried and ran off.

Jupiter sprinted after him. And there was no way to hide! The whole pier was more than two hundred metres long. Only when they reached its end could they take cover.

For a few moments, it looked pretty good. They ran out of the light beam of the truck and seemed safe. But then the driver had obviously overcome his shock—and stepped on the accelerator!

“He’s after us!” cried Bob. “Come on, Juve, faster!”

Faster! He was already running as fast as he could! His lungs were burning after thirty metres! Even faster? The truck honked. The light came closer.

“He’s going to run us down!” Bob shouted.

Then they reached the end of the concrete walkway. Bob slipped around the corner of a large steel container. Jupiter was ten metres behind him. When he reached the container, Bob was gone. “Bob! Where are you?”

Someone grabbed him and dragged him into a gap between two containers. “Here I am. Hush now!”

With bated breath, they listened. The truck was close by! They didn’t dare look around the corner. The truck’s engine roar grew louder and louder.

Finally the truck stopped, about two metres away from the container.

An eternity passed. Only the roar of the engine could be heard. Did the driver get out of the truck? Was he looking for them? Did he come around the corner?

“Don’t come back here, you guys!” cried the driver nearby. “Understand?”

Then a door slammed shut and the truck set off with a hiss. Slowly it moved out of the pier onto the road. But it wasn’t until the noise had died down that Jupiter and Bob breathed again.

“My goodness,” gasped Jupiter.

“Let’s never do that again, okay?” moaned Bob.

“Agreed.”

They took a breather for a moment. Then it came back to them. “Pete is in danger! We have to go back!” Bob cried.

They ran out from between the containers and look towards the ship’s berth. It was already dark and silent—too dark and too still. No one stood there anymore. Everyone had gone aboard. Jupiter had a dark intuition. Then came a roar—the sound of an engine starting. Already before Jupiter and Bob realized what they were hearing, there was another sound of a vehicle behind them. When they turned around, they saw two headlights coming into the pier towards them.

“The truck!” cried Bob. “It’s coming back!” In panic, he looked around for the next hiding place, but Jupiter held him back.

“That’s not the truck. It’s a taxi!” The taxi raced towards them and stopped right next to them. The passenger side window was rolled down. “Thank goodness, you’re still here!”

“Jelena!” Bob cried. “Is everything all right? What... what are you doing here?”

“I want to know if everything is all right! Where is Pete?”

“He’s—”

“Here he comes!” cried Bob with relief. A slender figure ran across the pier towards them. “Thank goodness he made it.”

Jupiter narrowed his eyes. “That’s not Pete. That’s Skinny.”

Skinny stopped panting beside them. “That just about did it.” He looked suspiciously at the taxi. “Who is that?”

“A friend,” Jupiter said succinctly. “What happened?”

“The plan has failed,” Skinny explained. “Suddenly everyone was in a big hurry to get on board. I had to pretend I was going on board. I could barely climb out of a porthole and jump back onto the pier.”

Now Jupiter understood. The roar! The engine! “The ship! The *Explorer* is leaving.”

Skinny nodded. “I guess they’ve brought forward their departure.”

“Where is Pete?” cried Jelena.

Skinny looked irritated from one to the other. “Is he... Is he with you?”

“No!” Bob shouted.

“I... I met him below deck and told him to get out of there as fast as he could!”

“He’s still on board?” cried Jelena in shock. “He must get off there at once, he’s in great danger!”

“What danger?” Bob asked.

“Don’t ask, Bob,” Jelena cried. “Better hurry. Get him off!”

The two detectives ran towards the ship’s berth. Whatever Jelena knew scared the hell out of them.

“My goodness!” cried Bob. “The ship! Look, Juve, it has just sailed off!”

When Bob and Jupiter finally reached the pier, the gangplank was gone, the ropes untied and the *Explorer* had already left. As they stood there staring, the engines roared through the night as the ship turned and slowly picked up speed.

“Pete!” cried Jupiter, forgetting all caution. “Pete!!!”

Nothing changed on the ship. Untouched, the steel monster stomped out to sea, moving faster and faster. Helplessly, the two detectives watched as it shot through the harbour exit. The hull of the ship could no longer be seen in the darkness, only the position lights were flashing.

The *Explorer* disappeared into the night.

*To be continued in
Part II: The Forgotten People.*